

A romantic illustration of a man and a woman in 19th-century attire. The man is wearing a green military-style jacket with gold epaulettes and a white waistcoat. The woman is wearing a voluminous, light pink ball gown. They are standing in a room with dark wood paneling and a fireplace decorated with Christmas lights and garlands. The man is looking down at the woman, who is looking up at him.

CHRISTMAS WITH A CZAR

BESTSELLING AUTHOR
EMILY E K MURDOCH

Christmas with a Czar

Emily E K Murdoch

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*To one of the most precious people in the world: Olive Bolt.
I didn't expect it would take so long to meet you, but you are nonetheless
so precious.
And J.*

Acknowledgments

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And to my family. Thank you.

1

“And yet you promised to abide by our agreement when we left home,” Anne said with a heavy sigh. A smile was still plastered over her face; they were in public. She was not going to be the one to draw attention to their argument. “After this Christmas, no more talking about marriage. I will remain single, and happy.”

“And I said it was a foolish agreement in the first place.” Sir Thomas Marsh frowned at his daughter as two footmen bowed them through another set of double doors. “I should never have agreed it with you.”

Anne knew it had been foolish of her to think her father would abide by their compromise. The entire carriage ride to St. James’ Court, he had been quiet – a little too quiet.

A footman stared and Anne fought down her desire to blush. She knew she looked ridiculous, dressed up in last decade’s fashions, but that was what Prinny wanted.

The Prince Regent. She must not use his nickname here, at his court! Anne had always hated the pomp and circumstance of the court, but Prinny did not. He loved to feel important, special, loved.

They walked towards another set of doors, and two footmen in the royal family’s livery bowed as they opened the doors.

“Really,” Anne hissed at her father as they walked through, “St. James’ Court, of all places? You think I will find a husband here?”

“You are twenty nine years old,” her father reminded her, not unkindly. “If not now, we are rapidly running out of time.”

Anne rolled her eyes. “I am not quibbling over my age, Father, but your methods. Every young chit of a thing will be here this Christmas, for the Season. Beautiful, young women. You really believe that any gentleman will even be able to notice me?”

“Will there be any girls here like me?” A small voice piped up.

Anne turned to look behind her. Meredith looked uncomfortable in the formal bodice Sir Thomas had insisted she wear.

“Ask Father,” Anne said shortly. “Not many twelve year olds are brought to St. James’ Court.”

She glared at her father for good measure, who protested, “You

think I would leave her behind? Besides, you are not unattractive, Anne – ”

“Well, thank you!”

“ – and you have a little charm and wit,” Sir Thomas continued steadily. “If you are determined this is to be your final Season, foolish as I think that is, then I would like the best for you.”

Their little family passed a pair of ladies in the styles of the 1790s, who stared at them. Anne tried to keep her head up high. They may not be highly titled, wealthy, or noble, but there had been Marshes in Romney since the Romans. She belonged here, as the daughter of a gentleman, just as they did.

“Papa, will there be anyone like me here?” Meredith’s voice, a little plaintive now, rose above the growing noise emanating from the double doors ahead of them.

Sir Thomas paused and looked down. “No,” he said finally, “I do not think so, Meredith. But there may be a few children that live around here that you could play with.”

Meredith scrunched up her nose and Anne’s heart squeezed. “I suppose so.”

Anne opened her mouth to speak but they had just reached another set of double doors. Loud chatter poured underneath it, and there was laughter, and music.

Sir Thomas breathed in heavily. “We are here.”

“Yes,” said Anne quietly. “And this is our last fortnight here at Court, Father. You promised. Our rooms may only be downstairs, but this is the last time I am coming here.”

She caught his eye and tried to show him, through the fierceness of her look, that she was in absolutely no place to debate this.

Her father sighed. “You always get your own way eventually, Annika.”

Her heart softened. He only used her pet name when he felt the loss of her mother most profoundly. But before she could speak, the two slightly sneering footmen opened the doors.

The Marshes were hit with the noise and smells of a royal court preparing for Christmas. The room was large, ordinarily a ballroom but today used for the many visitors to the Royal Court to circulate, admire, and be admired. A pair of thrones were situated at one end, at present completely empty.

Anne attempted to hold herself as though she absolutely belonged there, but it was a challenge. It had only been after a

lengthy argument that they had even come here, leaving their warm home in the Kentish countryside, to come to this cold and stiff place – and for Christmas, no less.

The smell of sickly pomades hit her, and she paused, so strong was the intoxicating stench. Her father looked at her quizzically.

“This is my last Season,” she whispered forcefully. “And then I am disappearing from society.”

Sir Thomas rolled his eyes and continued walking into the room, nodding at a few acquaintances as they slowly circulated.

Anne tried not to allow her thoughts to be obvious on her face. She could not wait to leave this place, and they had only arrived twenty minutes ago! To think, they would have to spend Christmas here, amongst the intrigues of Court, when all she wanted to do was celebrate the joys of the festive season with her father and Meredith, at home.

Sir Thomas had consoled her on their journey here with tales of excitement and drama, but Anne knew better. In the last ten years of being trotted out in the hope of securing a husband, she had seen little true excitement. It was all restrictions, rigid rules, and no true fun at all.

“You never know,” Sir Thomas murmured as they continued to walk around the edge of the room, ensuring they were seen by everyone, “you could still get married.”

She could not help but laugh aloud at his words. “After all that has happened, the secret we have kept for...”

It was then that Anne caught Meredith’s eye, and she allowed her voice to trail away.

“I suppose you are getting old,” her father muttered.

Fury rose in Anne’s heart, but she controlled herself. She would not snap at her father, not in public, not over this tired old argument.

Instead, she turned her gaze around the room, and sighed. It was precisely what she had expected: plenty of elderly women, in the fashions from their youth, and a few gentlemen of around her age, all likely married. Their foppish styles looked ridiculous, but she swallowed down the boredom.

This was the last year she would be trotted out to the marriage market, and would have to put up with those idiotic young fools.

Meredith pulled at Sir Thomas’ sleeve. “Papa, my bodice is...I cannot breathe properly.”

Anne smiled. She was not the only one then, who hated the restrictive clothing of the Court.

"Hush, Meredith," Sir Thomas said quickly, looking around to ensure they had not been overheard.

Anne squeezed Meredith's hand and spoke under her breath. "I do not like my clothes either, Merry, but we only need stay here an hour or two. We can then retreat to our rooms just around the corner, and you can get into your day gown."

"But why do we have to stay here at all?" Meredith looked around the room with wide eyes.

Anne sighed. "To be seen."

The double doors opened once more and a further rush of people entered the room, which grew even stuffier as people started to push their way through. A few gentlemen were in the crowd of newcomers, but they gravitated almost immediately to a small gaggle of young ladies, all younger than twenty if Anne was any judge.

She sighed and tried to keep her head high. This was so foolish, so ridiculous. She had been an ignorant chit ten years ago, certainly not worthy of any interesting conversation. She could probably run rings around those young men, but none of them would look at her twice, and all because she had a little more experience!

"I cannot see any other children my age," Meredith whispered to her father. "I thought you said..."

But Anne's attention was distracted away from their conversation. As her gaze had moved lazily around the room, she had spotted a gentleman on the other side in the most formal clothing she had ever seen before. It was almost a military uniform, but not one she recognised, covered in gold trimming and brass buttons.

He was also prodigiously handsome. Tall, with dark hair that was incredibly unkempt, with dark eyes and a closely clipped beard that did not hide his strong jaw. His eyes were bright but he looked just as bored as she felt.

Anne felt a flicker of curiosity well up inside her. Who was this man? Why did he stand so alone, so aloof, away from everyone else in the room. What sort of strange costume was he wearing?

A footman had approached them with a tray of drinks, and her father took one thankfully.

"My lady?"

Anne thanked him as she took a glass for herself, and then added, "Do you know who that gentlemen is?"

The footman looked in the direction she had pointed, and then sniffed haughtily. "He calls himself Alexei Dmitry Immanuil Maximilian Konstantinovich. Says he is the true Czar of Russia."

The servant was called away before Anne could make any further enquiries, but the answers she had received just made her even more curious. He says he is a Czar? What could that even mean?

She looked at him again. He was evidently an important gentleman – or at the very least, self-important. That was not a gentleman who would consider Miss Marsh from Romney a suitable bride, and she did not wish to marry either, but could he be a distraction for the next two weeks that she was forced to be here?



* * *

Maxim nodded at a gentleman who passed him, but did not say a word. It would just encourage him to stop, and he was in no mood to speak to anyone.

The formality of the room, the stifled conversation, the reserve; it was too much. It reminded him too much of home, the rigours of the Court, the careful way everyone had to speak – and though there were moments of joy, there were few positive memories.

He had expected Prinny to be here by now. Everyone had told him that the Prince Regent loved to preside over his Court, when in town, and so he had dressed up to – what was it they said here? Ah, the nines. He had dressed up to nine, if that was the phrase, all in the hope of finally conversing with the ruler of this country man to man. But he was not here.

Maxim pulled at the tight collar and sighed. All he wanted to do was get out of these stuffy clothes and let off steam. Jump on a

horse, maybe, and ride full pelt to the countryside, to get out of the coldness of London.

But he had to stay. He could not leave now, and hear later from an acquaintance that the moment he had stepped out of the Court, the Prince had stepped in.

A gaggle of ladies passed him by but he did not watch them go. No matter how many beautiful women there were, it did not change the fact that St. James' Court was more like a prison than a palace, and he knew far too much about the former.

He has to stay. No one can ever discover his secret, and if he left now...

His lazy eye meandered around the room. His gaze caught the eye of a woman who smiled coquettishly. She was rather pretty, in an English sort of way, and for a moment Maxim considered wandering over to flirt for a few minutes. Anything to take his mind off this boring wait for a Prince who may or may not appear.

But no; he must stay focused.

"I think the food here is absolutely awful." His companion had returned from the table which had been laden with the best food England had to offer, but his expression was one of disgust. "*Répugnante.*"

Maxim smiled. Well, there was one prince here, but Prince Édouard of Aviroux was not the one who could give him his throne back. They were family, of a sort, and had gained him his invitation to this dratted place.

"You think French cuisine is better?"

Prince Édouard grinned. "Well, yes, actually. I suppose that is of no surprise to you?"

Maxim laughed but said nothing. This fortnight over the Christmas festivities would be much drabber once Édouard returns to his country estate.

"What is on your mind, Maxim – actually no, do not tell me. It will drive you mad, I am sure, if I attempt to guess."

"All this formality," Maxim growled. "All this waiting around – I am of royal blood, I should be able to just go and find the Prince Regent and –"

"You, complaining about English formality?" Prince Édouard laughed. "I thought the Russian royal court was the strictest in the world? You're a Czar, damnit!"

Maxim did not reply.

His friend sighed. "I hate to leave you in a bad temper, but I need to be off."

Maxim's attention snapped to their conversation. "Be off?"

"Leave," Prince Édouard said with a wry smile. "My apologies, but you will enjoy your Christmas here. I do think that everyone should experience Christmas at St. James', at one point or another. No one does Christmas like the English."

"It will not be the same without you," Maxim said honestly. "Where are you going?"

Strangely for his friend, Prince Édouard hesitated. "You would not believe me if I told you. Letters will find me."

Without another word, he walked away, slipping out of the door.

Maxim frowned. Édouard always had been very impetuous, but he did not have time to consider his strange parting words as an Englishman wandered up to him.

"You the Czar, y'say?"

Maxim sighed. He had had this type of conversation before, but there was no way to avoid it. These people simply had to know. Where did the English get this sense of curiosity?

"Your servant," he said stiffly.

The man sniffed. "Don't believe in royal titles, me."

Maxim attempted to smile, but it was difficult. "Really? I think the Regent would be interested to know that."

"Well, when I say royal titles, I mean people like you. Foreigners," said the gentleman, with seemingly no idea of his own rudeness. "You are just a Czar pretender, if you ask me."

Irritation rushed through Maxim's veins but he would not rise to the temptation of shouting at this idiot. "Thank you for your opinion."

Surely anyone would take the hint, but the gentleman did not seem to have any idea that Maxim did not wish to speak with him.

"And if you ask me," he continued, "the English crown should not be protecting you."

Maxim swallowed down the retort that he had not, in fact, asked him, but said instead quietly, "I am here to speak with the Regent, to have him confirm me as the rightful Czar, and then I shall indeed be on my way."

The gentleman stared, seemingly unable to think of anything else to say, and then walked away.

Maxim watched him accost a pair of ladies on the other side of the room, and considered calling him out for a duel as a defiler of his name, when he was distracted by a tap on his shoulder and a female voice.

“So, you are the Czar, are you?”

2

It was impossible not to smile at the surprise on the possible Czar's face, and Anne felt a rush of excitement flow through her. It was evident that this gentleman, in all his finery and gold tassels, was not accustomed to women being so forward.

Anne was hardly accustomed to it either. This was unlike her – not that she was a wilting wallflower most of the time. But young ladies, even those whom society would not class as young anymore, did not walk up to gentlemen they had not been introduced to and speak so boldly to them.

She had never been so bold. Well, not since...

Anne pushed away the thought. She left that part of her life behind, and she had done so a long time ago.

The gentleman described as a Czar recovered quickly. He smiled, charm oozing from every pore, before clicking his heels and reaching out to kiss her hand.

The sudden contact, even through gloves, was alarming and Anne found herself a little flustered but managed to say, "Is that a yes?"

He nodded. "Alexei Dmitry Immanuil Maximilian Konstantinovich, Czar of Russia. My friends call me Maxim."

Anne raised an eyebrow. "Am I meant to be impressed?"

Maxim – Anne blushed at the thought, and immediately told herself she must think of him as the Czar – grinned. His smile utterly transformed his face, giving it a fresh joy that his laconic boredom simply had not created.

"I would like you to be," he said quietly, "but I think I would have to go far to impress you."

"Perhaps," Anne said with a smile, "but you are the first royalty I have met today, so I am a little impressed."

She glanced out at the crowd for a moment, unable to continue staring without her cheeks pinking, and saw her father nodding encouragingly.

Anne sighed. Why wasn't it possible to speak to someone, anyone, without her father getting his hopes up?

Her father was alone – where was Meredith? For a moment, her heart stopped, but her searching eyes quickly spotted her, talking to one of the court musicians. He was showing her the different strings on his violin, and the tension disappeared from her shoulders.

“Are you always this aloof?” Maxim’s voice cut through her thoughts, bringing her to her senses.

Anne turned back and attempted to ignore how handsome he was. “Only when attempting to frustrate a gentleman.”

He laughed, a clipped laugh that nevertheless had warmth in it. “You have already been far more entertaining, Miss...”

Anne tried not to blush. “Anne Marsh. My friends call me Anne.”

“Anne Marsh,” Maxim said, with such intensity that Anne felt her cheeks heat. “Far more entertaining than anyone else in this stuffed court.”

She frowned, trying to ignore the strange desire that was starting to overwhelm her to move closer. “Stuffed?”

“Stuffy,” he hastily corrected, and Anne was surprised to see a little colour in his own cheeks. “English phrases do not come easily to me.”

He certainly had a regal bearing, she could not help but notice, but there was also stiffness there. An unwillingness to be wrong? There was a slight lilt in his voice, but not a strong enough accent that she would have noticed.

“Considering you are speaking in your second language,” Anne said reassuringly, “it is I who should be ashamed to be so uncultured. Your English is impressive.”

“Ah, but culture is not necessary with such radiant beauty,” Maxim said grandly.

The compliment made her smile, but perhaps not for the reason that he expected. “Your Grace, if that is the correct way to address a royal Czar of the Russian court, you do not have to impress me.”

Her words had clearly surprised him, and he took a slight step backwards. “You know, you are the first person to even attempt to speak to me as a Czar.”

“And was I correct?”

Maxim shrugged, his broad shoulders showing their strength as they moved. “There is not really a direct translation for how you would address me, and if we were in Russia, I do not think we would be speaking at all.”

She knew what he meant, and she was not offended by it.

“Because my father is a mere baronet?”

His face brightened. “Ah, I did not know – he is here?”

“Somewhere,” she said nonchalantly. She was not interested in a more detailed discussion of her family history. It was his family, his identity, that intrigued her.

“I would not normally ask such an impertinent question,” Anne said quietly, ignoring the looks she was starting to receive by speaking to a gentleman for so long, “but I must know the truth. You are a Czar?”

Maxim spread out his arms with a smile. “Do you think I am?”

She did not know what made her do it. Before she could really think about her actions, Anne was walking around Maxim slowly, taking him all in. He was far taller than she had guessed from across the room, and was formed as though God had decided to build perfection.

He laughed awkwardly when she returned to face him. “Well?”

Anne shrugged with a laugh. “You know, it is impossible to tell who is a czar, and who is just a well-dressed gentleman these days.”

Maxim laughed and protested, “My dear Miss Marsh, you should know me by my bearing!”

She laughed in turn. “My dear Maxim, how many royals do you think I see every day?”

He chuckled and Anne felt a flicker of something hot and heavy in her heart – something she had not felt in a long time. Now her cheeks were blushing not because of the heat of the room, or something that Maxim – the Czar, the Czar – had said. No, now they were pink because of the deep attraction that she felt.

What did she think she was doing? Whether or not this handsome man dressed like some sort of military leader from another country really was a junior member of the Russian royal family, and even thinking it made her feel ridiculous, he would never consider her a suitable bride.

All she was doing was creating more opportunities to feel pain.

But Maxim was charming. Of course he was charming, Anne reminded herself. He was here, at St. James Court this Christmas with the express purpose of convincing Prinny to support him.

Poor Prinny, Anne could not help but think with a smile. She could not conceive of anyone less suitable for ruling a country, and yet all he ended up doing was getting pulled into political matters.

No, Maxim was here to charm people, and if she were not

careful, she could convince herself that he was here to charm her.

“Why come to St. James Court at Christmas?” she said aloud. “Most people prefer to stay at home with their family during the festive period.”

Something like a dark shadow passed over Maxim’s face. “My family is sadly not living.”

Discomfort rose from Anne’s stomach like bile. “I am sorry, I did not mean to – ”

“You were not to know,” he said shortly. “I am here to prove my royal lineage, of course, and to do that I must be where the Prince Regent is.”

He did not seem offended by her previous slip, and something gave her courage to say, “Well, you already call yourself a Czar, you know.”

Maxim grinned. “I am the worst kept secret at St. James.”



* * *

Maxim watched the beautiful woman laugh, as though the words he had spoken were nothing but a clever joke, and sighed inwardly.

If this had been any other time or place, then he would have wooed this woman. Anne Marsh. Her name was so unassuming, and it would have been easy to overlook her. No young spring chit, but not old at all. Maturity without being maturity. Braver than a new girl to the Season, but with all of the elegance that a few years out gave a person.

Yes, he would have wooed her, perhaps even stolen a kiss from her under the mistletoe on Christmas Day. As it was, he must not get distracted.

He already had a huge battle ahead of him, and if he was going to be successful in getting his royal title confirmed by the Prince Regent, he must not take his eyes away from his prize.

Even if the distraction was a dazzling woman...

Who at this point, looked a little confused. "I do not understand. Did you intend to keep your identity a secret, while at the same time attempting to claim your title? How are you meant to be recognised as a Czar if you also want to keep yourself a secret?"

For an instant, Maxim considered just lying. He barely knew this woman; he was not beholden to tell her the truth, and he could not be sure to trust her. But just a glance at her open expression, blue eyes wide and curious, her dark hair piled up in the latest fashion, he felt in his gut that he could trust her.

There was something about Anne Marsh. Something that drew him in. He could tell, though he could not exactly put his finger on why, she made him feel safe – and at the same time, wild and reckless.

He would tell her something. He did not need to tell her the full story, anyway.

"I am a Czar," he said quietly. "But not the Czar. In Russia, titles are a little more plentiful."

Anne's eyes widened. "So, a little like a duke or an earl?"

Maxim shrugged. "I suppose so, although we have those too. The Russian royal family is...complicated. And yes, I have a secret, one that I cannot tell enticing women, even if I wanted to. Enticing as you are."

He had expected her to simper, to smile at his flattery. But Miss Marsh did not stop surprising him as she threw back her head and laughed.

"Come now, Maxim, I think we are friends now. You do not need to fall back on old habits."

"Habits?"

Anne's eyes glittered as she smiled. "Are gentlemen not taught to flatter ladies almost as soon as they are introduced to society? I know I certainly was taught how to accept them, but I am too old to curtsy every time anyone says anything pretty – and besides, you should save your compliments for women who could believe them. Enticing?"

She smiled again, a knowing smile that made Maxim shiver slightly.

How could she not consider herself enticing? Every bone in his body was drawn to her, desperate to be closer.

He looked again a little more closely. Miss Anne Marsh had the

kind of beauty that the English were famous for; gentle, elegant, and unshowy. You could walk past her fine eyes and laughing expression and think nothing of her, but if you took more than a minute to examine that expression, you would see more than mere laughter there.

She was beautiful, and Maxim had to swallow down the physical attraction that was welling up within him in a way he had not experienced before. His heart was beating a little faster than he had expected, and he could feel the temptation to step closer, to be nearer, growing in the pit of his stomach.

"You are," he said with frank honesty, "the most beautiful woman at St. James Court."

Anne looked around the room and Maxim followed her gaze, taking in the Christmas decorations which had been decked around the room. Holly and other evergreen branches had been brought in, woven with gold and silver bells. Gold ribbons adorned every part of the room, glittering in the weak sunlight pouring through the windows, and there was mistletoe dotted about the room.

Maxim swallowed and looked above him. None there, and it was a good thing too. He would cause quite a stir if he kissed a lady he was not married to, here in public – let alone one he had met merely minutes before.

Anne was shaking her head. "It is clear, Your Grace, that your flirtation has got the better of you! There are scores of women here far more beautiful – but I thank you. I must admit, talking to you has been the nicest part of my visit here today. Will you be here the entire Christmas season?"

Maxim opened his mouth to answer, but was distracted by an elderly gentleman who was waving at Anne.

His heart sank. Surely she could not be married to that old soul? To be sure, you saw marriages with unequal ages all the time, but that would be ridiculous! And he had called her Miss Marsh, and she had not corrected him...

Maxim's heart sank even further as a young girl, almost approaching womanhood, wandered up to the elderly gentleman and took his hand. They both waved over to Anne, evidently beckoning her over to them.

A child as well!

Why did he feel so despondent? He hardly knew her, and yet already the idea that she was unattainable had cast gloom over his

heart.

“You must excuse me,” Anne said quietly. “I can see that my father wants me.”

Her words caused Maxim’s spirits to lift. She was not married to him, then.

“Your sister is waiting for you also,” he said quietly.

She glanced at the girl and then back to him. “Will you be staying at court for Christmas, Your Grace?”

Maxim nodded. “I shall be a Czar by Christmas, just you wait and see. Officially, I mean. Royally recognised.”

Anne smiled and curtsied low, saying, “Well, in that case, I will see you at the ball tonight.”

3

The first yawn was easy to stifle, the second almost managed to escape, but the third forced Anne to raise her hand. Not a single person at Prinny's ball noticed – but then, they were all engaged in meaningless conversations without her.

It was a challenge, not allowing her boredom to show, but then no one was particularly interested in whether she was entertained or not, and she did not think anyone would blame her for feeling so tired of it all.

A pair of elderly gentlemen walked past her, inclining their heads, and she returned the curtsy, using the movement downwards to hide another yawn.

The same old people going round and round the room, ensuring they could be seen and at the same time, look at everyone else.

It was just like the first time her father had brought her here, when she had been presented. A decade ago, now. It was a challenge to remember a time when she was not out in society, it was so long ago – and yet while outside these four walls, the world has made progress, things have changed, fashions altered, St. James was exactly the same.

Anne's gaze moved around the room. Yes, the same dances that were popular ten, almost twenty years ago. A quadrille, perhaps the most boring dance that was ever conceived. The food was the same, no new recipes or exciting spices there.

Even the fashions were the same! Everyone knew Prinny liked his ladies in a slightly older style, and so to please him, everyone kept their oldest gown and brought it out whenever they returned to town.

Anne smiled sadly. It was a time bubble, a moment of history stuck in amber, and it was all in the aid of making one man feel special.

What was worse, the conversation was the same recycled nonsense.

Sir Thomas nudged her. "You are supposed to be enjoying yourself."

“How?” Anne whispered. “I am so excessively bored!”

“Now then, really,” her father chided under his breath, his smile never disappearing. “How many people are desperate to be here, at St. James’ Court, and at Christmas!”

Anne looked at her father closely, and for the first time, realised that he was really quite an old man. His whiskers were grey, his hair thinning on top, and a slight stoop appearing in his shoulders.

He had become an old man, and she had not even noticed.

“I would be more than happy to exchange places with them,” she whispered instead, “so I can return home, to Romney, and enjoy a quiet Christmas at home.”

Sir Thomas sighed as he shook his head. “I hope little Meredith will not be so troublesome when she is grown.”

The thought of Meredith at her first ball made Anne smile, finally. “She is nothing like me, thank goodness. Now, I am going to sit over here and – ”

“You will do no such thing,” her father said firmly. “You promised me you would take part in this ball, Annika.”

Anne hesitated. She had promised, but she had made that promise when she had thought Maxim – the Czar, she must not be so informal this evening – would be here. Not that she had expected anything more than a pleasant greeting, she reminded herself hastily. He was so entertaining to speak to. She felt truly alive, young even, when conversing with him.

Maxim would have relieved her boredom, making the ball almost tolerable, but he was nowhere to be seen.

She had considered asking a footman where he was, but she had been forward enough in public for one day. She had been wild enough to even ask who he was in the first place.

“It is not down to me whether I dance or not,” she reminded her father quietly. “I have to wait to be asked, and if that does not occur...”

“You could make yourself a little presentable,” he replied, a touch of distress in his voice. “Really, Anne, you put so little effort into your appearance these days.”

Anne took a deep breath, giving herself time to control her impulse to speak harshly to a gentleman who only wished her to be happy, albeit in a very specific way. She would not be getting married anytime soon, and the sooner he learned to accept that, the happier her father would be.

She always was impulsive. That side of her nature had landed her in trouble before, but even after rescuing herself from it – or being rescued – she could not help but be impulsive.

“Father, there are many young and eligible ladies here tonight,” she said, forgetting to lower her voice, “and the gentlemen here will likely as not ask them to dance, not me. I am bored, Father. Why do I not just return to – ”

“Ahem,” came a voice behind them.

Anne and her father whirled around, Anne’s cheeks red. If she had had any idea she was being overheard, she would never have spoken so, but as it was, she need not have concerned herself.

The woman who had interrupted them was seated behind them, a serious young lady with a book on her knee. Her spectacles were pushed to the end of her nose, and she had a stern look on her face.

Anne relaxed. This was not a woman who would spread gossip about the scandalous thing which Sir Thomas’ daughter dared to speak.

“I do apologise,” the young lady said quietly. “I did not intend to overhear you, but as I do not enjoy dancing whatsoever, I found a nook for myself and therefore did hear you. Miss Mariah Wynn.”

Anne curtsied, and as her father bowed, he said, “Sir Thomas Marsh and his daughter, Anne. Are you any relation to Edward, Viscount Wynn?”

Miss Wynn’s face distorted for the briefest of moments that Anne thought if she had blinked at the same time, she would have missed it. There was a story there.

“My adoptive brother,” Miss Wynn said stiffly. “Miss Marsh, there is a small library down the corridor. Turn left, along until a right turn and then fourth door on the right. All are welcome to visit, and I can personally recommend it.”

Relief washed over Anne. At least, a respite from this tiresome ball.

“I forbid you from going,” Sir Thomas said quietly, able to see his daughter’s thoughts immediately.

Anne smiled wanly. “Do you remember what happened the last time you attempted to forbid me from doing something?”

Her father hesitated, and then nodded.

“Thank you, Miss Wynn,” Anne began, but she had already disappeared back into her book.

Squeezing her father’s arm and reassuring him that she would

not return to their rooms too late, Anne carefully navigated her way around the dancers in the centre of the room, and slipped through the door into the quiet corridor behind.

It was cool and calm, precisely what she needed. Turning left, she tried to remember Miss Wynn's instructions. Was it a right turn and third door on the left, or a left turn and third door on the right?

After meandering down a corridor that looked exactly the same as any others, Anne opened a door and gasped.

There was no library in this room. On the contrary, it was a bed chamber – and inside it was Maxim, half naked.



* * *

Maxim looked up at the intrusion and could not help but smile. What did Miss Anne Marsh think she was doing, walking into a gentleman's bed chamber – and at St. James' Court, too!

The gossips of society would have a field day if they caught her.

There was no embarrassment. Maxim had travelled on the road too long to be interested about who saw him in only his breeches, and he had nothing to be ashamed of.

Anne, on the other hand, looked absolutely mortified.

"Come on in, Miss Marsh," he said in a low voice.

It was a joke, really. He knew enough that any self-respecting English lady would never allow herself to be found in such a compromising position.

Joke or not, Anne stepped forward and closed the door behind her, leaning against it as though for support.

"Make yourself at home," he said, before turning to look back at the two shirts laid out on the bed he was choosing between.

It was only when he turned his back that self-consciousness rose over him. It was not that he minded being looked at, exactly, but it was more that he knew that she, Miss Anne Marsh, was the one

doing the looking.

Did she like what she saw?

Maxim pushed the thought away. He could not think like that. Still, her presence felt right, not intrusive at all. As though she should have been there the whole time.

Glancing around, Anne's cheeks were pink but she was clearly determined not to allow her embarrassment to overwhelm her, and his respect for her grew.

"I feel strange needing to ask this question," he said nonchalantly, picking up one of the shirts to inspect it, "but what is a respectable lady like yourself doing in here, Annika?"

She gasped. "What – why do you call me that?"

Maxim shrugged, picking up the second shirt. "'Tis a common enough version of Anne from my country. You do not like it?"

"No, it is not that, it's...that is what my family calls me."

Heat grew in Maxim's stomach as he considered the shirts. "Well, now I know that, I shall always call you by such a name. But that does not answer my question."

"I thought it was a library," she said, her voice a little unsure.

"A library?" Maxim repeated. "Well, I suppose you can read something in here if you wish, but you might find other things more to your liking."

He turned away, berating himself for allowing his tongue to get the better of him. What did he think he was doing? He could not allow Annika to get the wrong idea.

He compared the two shirts to the two cravats also laid out on his bed, and tried to focus on getting dressed.

How did she have such an effect on him? He could feel his body getting ready for her, desperate for her touch, as though she was the one who was barely dressed. The wild thought took flight, his imagination serving up delectable images of Annika, dressed in nothing but a –

"Do you not have a valet for that?"

Maxim jumped. She was much closer than he realized. "I had to leave all my servants behind in Russia, I am afraid."

Annika moved to the left so she appeared in his line of sight. Her face was curious. "Why did you have to leave Russia?"

He swallowed. Ignoring the question completely, he said instead, "You will have to tell me which you think works best."

She hesitated, but to Maxim's surprise moved closer, her cheeks

still a little pink. Every second was an internal battle not to reach out and touch her.

Here they stood: both of them beside the bed, her cheeks pink, and his torso utterly naked. Just one swift movement, and they could both be on the bed.

“This shirt,” she said, a little breathlessly, “and the blue cravat.”

Maxim could not help but smile. He had the same effect on her that she had on him, then.

If only she was a servant girl, he could put a little silver in her palm and enjoy her – but she was a gentlewoman, and he should treat her that way, or he would get them both in trouble.

It was on the tip of his tongue to instruct her to leave before someone caught them, but then she spoke.

“Why, what medals!” Her eyes had caught sight of the trio of medals by the side of his bed. “Are they all yours?”

Maxim’s smile was forced. Telling her this would be strange, crossing some line. He had not told anyone else the meaning of those medals – but Annika was different, somehow.

“The very left was my father’s,” he said gruffly. “The central one, my brother’s. He...died last year. And the very right, my own. Earned through battle, though I will not say who with for this is an English court with English sensibilities. Just pieces of metal, really.”

He had thought his emotions had been forced down well, but one look at Annika told him he had not hidden his feelings as well as he thought.

“You miss them,” she said simply. “And your country, and your home, I think.”

Maxim nodded, not trusting his voice. Clearing his throat with a cough, he said, “Perhaps I am just here for a pension from the Regent. Perhaps I am no Czar at all.”

Annika smiled. “Perhaps.”

Her fingers reached out for the medals at the same time as his and the moment was electric. Something connected them more deeply than any other connection he had ever experienced. It was like nothing he had ever experienced.

Maxim’s eyes met hers, and he read in those eyes everything he needed to know. Acting on impulse, knowing he may regret it in the morning, he leaned forward and kissed her on the lips.

She had not expected it and she almost gasped in his mouth – but instead of resisting, as he had expected, she moved into his

arms and wove her fingers in his hair.

Maxim's body came truly alive for the first time in months. Her lips on his, his arms around her, the passion they shared – Annika was eager for him, for his kiss, and it was incredible.

Who knows what would have happened if at that moment, the door had not opened and a footman had entered.

4

"I have invited you here," Sir Thomas said in a menacing voice, pacing up and down before them, "for a discussion about – "

"We know why," Anne said heavily, rolling her eyes. "A footman saw us, he told another footman, he told several ladies maids, they told their mistresses, one of them told – "

"Thank you, Anne," her father said sternly.

Anne glared. If only she had thought to change her gown into something a little more comfortable. The court gown was heavy, studded with pearls, and restricted her breathing. If she had known they would still be discussing this three hours later...

The grandfather clock in the corner of the room struck midnight, and each chime seemed to force its way into her head as though the hammer was hitting her. The room was hot, too hot, and they just seemed to be having the same conversation over and over again.

"I think we should sleep on this," she said aloud. "It is late. We can discuss this again in the morning, when – "

"I am not letting *you* out of my sight until this is resolved," her father said fiercely, a finger pointing at Maxim.

Maxim looked at the finger politely but made no other move. Sir Thomas lowered his finger slowly, coughed, and continued pacing.

The heat of embarrassment rolled over Anne and she could not ignore it – but wasn't this what she deserved? Had she not brought this upon herself, by allowing herself to be found in such a position?

The memory of Maxim's arms around her, his lips on hers, the desire they had shared...

It was madness! What had she been thinking? Kissing a man, a man who was half naked, to boot, in his own bed chamber – and while the rest of the court was at a ball mere yards down the corridor?

She was fortunate it was only a footman, and not someone far more important who had discovered them.

It was the sort of stupid mistake that young girls in their first Season made; blinded by the bright lights of town, easily led by

gentlemen who knew exactly what they were doing...

But she was not young. She had experienced plenty of Seasons, and only once allowed herself to be overtaken by her emotions.

Anne caught Maxim's eye and her cheeks flamed. It was intoxicating, to think of the kiss – but she must not. She must control herself.

“Anne!”

She jumped, looking at her father who was glaring.

“This may not be serious to you, but it is of great import to me.”

Anne sat up a little straighter in her chair. “I know, Father,” she said wearily, “but I am tired.”

She could not help but look over at Maxim once again, and saw to her surprise that he looked not only as awake as he had done three hours ago, but utterly relaxed. Leaning back in his chair, there was no sign of tension or stress across his handsome face.

How could he stand it? Having to sit here like naughty school children, as though they had done something wrong – but then, they had done.

Anne swallowed. She had to remember that she was in the wrong here. She had allowed herself to be swept away by emotions she did not really understand, and now she was having to pay the price for that.

When she looked up again, Maxim was smiling. “Look, Sir Thomas, you must understand that this sort of occurrence is not the first time – ”

“Really?” Sir Thomas' face became, if possible, even more thunderous as he resumed his pacing. “How many other ladies have you – ”

“ – here at court,” Maxim continued, without any increase of frustration in his voice. “And it happens to people in my position all the time. I will not cast aspersions on anyone in this royal family or others, but believe me, it is not unheard of.”

His hand reached into his coat pocket and pulled out his pocketbook. It was full of five pound notes.

Anne closed her eyes in horror, but when she opened them, the offending items were still visible.

“Put that away,” she hissed. “Maxim!”

He stared, utter confusion on his face. It was clear he had no comprehension of the offence his act had just given.

Sir Thomas sat down in a chair heavily. “My dear boy, you think

that's what this is all about? Money?"

For the first time in their conversation together, Maxim looked uncomfortable. "Sir, where I come from, it is money that is required to alleviate any hint of dishonour. It is money that resolves the upset between two families – I meant no disrespect."

"Well, that is not how things work here, in England," Sir Thomas snapped. "Here, 'tis honour and honour alone that can resolve situations – and honour is the only thing that will rectify this terrible error in judgement on you both."

It was at that moment that Anne realised what her father was suggested. "No."

"'Tis the only way!"

"But it was only..." Her cheeks flushed as she tried to say calmly, "Father, it was only a kiss. Just one, and if the footman had not entered the room, no one would be any the wiser."

"If the footman had not entered the room, I dread to think would have occurred," her father snapped.

Shame filled Anne's heart as she dropped her gaze. She would not have permitted anyone to speak to her like that, but after everything that had happened, her father had that right.

"What are you talking about?" Maxim's voice was calm, almost curious.

Anne took a deep breath. "My father," she said, "is thinking of marriage."

Maxim looked between her and her father. "Well, you are a little old, Sir Thomas, but I will think about it."

His laughter was cut shortly abruptly by the glare from both Marshes.

"A marriage, even just one for convenience, is the only way to repair Anne's reputation," Sir Thomas said heavily. "The only way."

Anne opened her mouth to argue, but then closed it again. She could think of no other solution, and it was embarrassing to think that at the age of nine and twenty, she had thrown away any chances of independent life because of a kiss.

But, what a kiss...

"Anne's name will be ruined by breakfast time," Sir Thomas said, a little harshly. "It will not take long for that footman to tell a few people, and they will tell a few, and before you know it all the gossips in London will know. It will be over for her."

"And for Meredith." Anne was surprised to find she had spoken

aloud, but as she caught her father's eye, she knew he had considered it too. "She would never make a match with such scandal in the family."

Sir Thomas sighed. "It is not a question of if, but when. There will be a scandal, Annika, but what we need to decide is what we can do to reduce the size of the scandal."

But they had forgotten someone.

"Excuse me," said Maxim hotly, staring at the pair of them, "but I think you are forgetting something! I am a Czar, and I should be marrying a princess of another realm!"

Fierce irritation rose up in Anne's stomach, despite her own frustration with her father's suggestion. Did he not believe her to be good enough for him? A gentleman who says he deserves a throne in a country hundreds of miles away, a tale that no one believed?

"Whether you are a Czar in Russia or not, you are no one here," said Sir Thomas cuttingly. "I mean no disrespect, sir, but here you have no title, no nobility, no wealth, no rank. If anything, you should be grateful to receive the hand of an English gentlewoman."

"I am not a cow at the meat market, ready to be parcelled off to the highest bidder!" Anne glared at her father, and at Maxim for good measure. "You have no need to marry me, sir, and I quite understand why you do not wish to."



* * *

Maxim opened his mouth and then closed it again. The words he had been about to say now seemed hollow, empty. And why?

Because a small part of him but one that was growing with every minute, did wish to marry Anne.

It was madness! He was a Czar, he should be approached by kings offering the hands of their daughters. Instead, he had this baronet almost beg him to take his daughter off his hands.

It did not make sense, but neither did the fact that his body had reacted so strongly when he had kissed her. And what a kiss: wild, and wonderful, and incomparable to any other kiss he had stolen over the years.

True, marriage could not have been further from his mind when he had arrived at St. James' Court, but he had other pressures to consider. Would a marriage with an English woman be the perfect opportunity to distract the gossipers from digging into his supposed past?

His gaze lifted from his hands to Anne, who pinked slightly under his gaze. She was certainly no consolation prize. Her beauty grew each time he beheld her, and if that kiss were anything to go by, their lovemaking would be spectacular.

Maxim coughed and shifted in his seat. Was he seriously considering this? What sort of life would he be taking her into? One of lies, secrets, moving around the world, never settled, never safe, never secure?

He would not choose that for anyone, let alone a young lady who is evidently intelligent, witty, beautiful – and with a family that cares for her.

Sir Thomas was staring at him, clearly waiting for a response. Maxim swallowed. He did not need a marriage, exactly – just an engagement. It would satisfy Sir Thomas' desperation, distract the court gossipers from investigating his true lineage, and may even give him some more chances to kiss Miss Anne Marsh...

Maxim swallowed. "I may not be good marriage material, Sir Thomas. I have a secret – "

But Sir Thomas did not permit him to continue, scoffing, "Oh, no such great secret I assure you. Everyone knows you are not the Czar's heir really, and I think you most foolish to continue saying it! You are here for a stipend, sir, you are here for money. Well, I can make this marriage worth your while."

"Enough!"

Both gentlemen looked at Anne, shocked to hear such an explosive word from her lips.

"Money should not be moving in either direction when it comes to discussing my marriage!" Anne glared at Maxim who felt a little ashamed. She continued, "Father, what you are suggesting is tantamount to selling me off to the highest bidder! I should be more than a daughter to you. A precious jewel, one that you would never

consider selling, but perhaps would give away to someone who not only deserved it, but knew how to appreciate it!"

Something deep inside him stirred as Maxim heard her words. Did he deserve Anne? It was evident that she was educated, witty, charming, and beautiful. What did he have to offer?

He swallowed. He was usually the one commanding a room, had always been the centre of any discussion back in Russia. It was time to take charge.

"I suggest a compromise."

Anne and Sir Thomas turned to look at him, and for the first time in their conversation, Maxim felt a little discomfited. How would they react to his suggestion?

"I admit, an English wife would open more doors for me across Europe," he said carefully, avoiding Anne's eye. "Particularly one like Miss Marsh. Well raised, clearly a gentlewoman, and with such beauty..."

Despite himself, he had caught Anne's gaze, and his voice trailed off. She was not impressed by his words.

"And so I suggest," Maxim said hastily, looking now at her father, "that we announce the engagement in the morning, and plan the wedding for Christmas Day."

"That is just over a week away!" Anne spluttered.

Maxim wavered aside her objection. "We are all stuck here in this St. James' Court you all love so much, with little other company. We will have the equivalent of years to become accustomed to each other, and with the Archbishop of Canterbury here for the festivities, he can give us a special dispensation."

"But you have forgotten," Anne said, a little tartly, "that I have no wish to marry you!"

"But the engagement will restore your reputation," said Maxim urgently. "That is your concern, is it not? We can say it is an engagement of long standing, that we were overcome for an instant at the joy of meeting again here, and that the wedding will be just one week away."

"And if she does not wish to wed you?" Sir Thomas smiled weakly at his daughter. "You do not think I would actually force you to do something that distressed you, do you?"

"Miss Marsh can inform me on Christmas Eve whether she wishes to go ahead with the marriage," Maxim said quickly. "If not, I will disappear to France the next morning – I am due to see some

friends there in any event – and Miss Marsh will be a jilted, sorrowful figure. One to claim society's pity, not scandal.”

There was a moment of silence, and then Anne said, “Father, you cannot seriously be considering – ”

“‘Tis an excellent suggestion,” Sir Thomas said heartily. “And I think I do not speak out of turn, Your Grace, when I say I think Anne will capitulate and wish to marry you in that time, giving you, as you say, a lovely English bride.”

Maxim bowed his head and could not help but smile. “I concur with you, sir.”

Anne leaned close and whispered under her breath, “What do you think you are doing?”

“Giving you an escape route from this conversation,” he returned.

She glared and then her features softened. “I may have just as many secrets as you, you know.”

Maxim shrugged. How little she knew. “I doubt it.”

Her gaze flickered to her father, who was beaming, and then returned to Maxim. “Well, then. It appears I have no choice but to acquiesce.”

Her tone was not exactly joyful, but despite this, Maxim found a flicker of joy curl around his heart. So, he would be receiving a bride for Christmas.

5

The deep breath that Anne brought into her lungs did nothing to calm her nerves, nor keep her hands from shaking.

She could barely believe it. There he was. The Royal Prince George of England. Prinny.

Despite St. James' Court being one of his favourite places, he almost never actually attended, but of course on the day that her marriage of convenience was announced, there he was.

"...terrible complexion," he was saying to someone as he lounged in the throne at one end of the room. "I could barely look at her for more than two minutes together, I ask you! How did..."

"This is it."

Maxim's voice was barely above a whisper but they were standing so close together, it seemed to echo into Anne's mind. She nodded, not trusting her voice to speak.

"You know," he continued in a whisper, "I believe this is the perfect opportunity for me to speak with His Royal Highness about my claim to the title of Czar!"

Anne chuckled under her breath, attempting to ignore the pointed stares radiating towards her from many faces around the room. "You think my father will allow you to distract the court from our impending marriage?"

Looking down, she saw her own hand on his arm. It had been placed there by her father, and it felt strange to see them so tangibly connected, and in public too.

To think: she had expected to come here, while away the hours of boredom as agreed with her father, perhaps spend a little more time with Meredith, and then return home.

Instead, she appeared to have gained a fiancé – and one who was not only handsome and charming, but claimed a royal title too!

Anne swallowed down the excitement and forced herself to remember that this was all an act. None of it mattered. She was going to tell Maxim on Christmas Eve that she could not marry him, just as they planned.

It was not as though they were actually going to be wed...

The mere thought of it forced an image into her mind, and it made her gasp aloud, it was so forceful. There she was, in her favourite gown – none of this court formality, just a simple muslin gown in a light blue – and before her was Maxim, in his finery as a Russian Czar. They stood together, at the altar of a church, and he was placing a ring on her finger.

Anne felt her cheeks blush and forced the image aside. Glancing up at Maxim, she tried to consider him as objectively as possible. Would marriage to him really be so awful?

He was personable, at least. In fact, she could probably listen to him all day. That kiss he had stolen, not that she had forced him away, had proven they were compatible in that way...

“Miss Anne Marsh, daughter of Sir Thomas Marsh, of Romney.”

Anne jumped at the sound of her own name being so formally presented in a loud voice by a servant in the largest powdered wig she had ever seen.

“Miss Anne Marsh?” Prinny looked over with a sneer. Anne felt her cheeks darken as he continued, “I have never heard of her. Who is she?”

A courtier, dressed in the court fashions which had never been permitted to be altered, leaned over into the prince’s ear, and whispered something.

Prinny’s gaze moved to her. Anne pinked, curtsying low as Max clicked his heels and bowed.

The prince snorted. “Ah, the so-called Czar, eh? Now Matthews, you were telling me earlier the most delicious bit of gossip and I did not hear the end of the tale. Was she really...”

It was only in that moment that Anne realised she had been holding her breath, and she allowed it to escape her lungs slowly, the tension she had not felt in her shoulders starting to lessen.

She glanced up at Maxim and caught the full weight of his disappointment – but then it was gone. He was smiling, and Anne knew he had forced down his emotions before the Royal Court.

“Well,” he said quietly, “he knows who I am now. That is a start.”

Anne could barely hear his final words due to the rising muttering around the room. Some were even starting to point as their chatter rose in volume.

“We are going to have to become accustomed to this, you know,” she said quietly, her hand squeezing his arm briefly. “All

this gossip, the pointing, the wondering, the rumours..."

"What do you mean, this is fantastic," breathed Maxim, looking around with a smile and inclining his head at a few people who were making the most obvious remarks about him. "Do you think we should circulate, and introduce ourselves?"

Anne stared in disbelief. "Do you mean to say you are enjoying this kind of attention?"

Maxim shrugged. "'Tis better than no attention at all."

Her mouth fell open. Well, if that was the way he was going to approach life, then he was certainly not the man for her.

"My dear ones!" Sir Thomas had rushed over to them, all smiles, and Anne plastered one of her own onto her face for his sake. "To think, the Prince Regent of our land saying my daughter's name, not once, but twice! Ah, this is a happy day indeed! The announcement of your betrothal!"

"Father, keep your voice down," Anne said quietly. "And remember, this is a marriage of convenience only, nothing more."

But Sir Thomas was not to be dissuaded from celebration. "Here, you must meet Meredith – Meredith Marsh, come here!"

Anne's heart leapt. "No, let her speak with – "

Meredith approached their group hesitantly, hiding behind Sir Thomas and peering out at Maxim from behind his safety.

Anne swallowed. She had had no plans for introducing Maxim to Meredith, and had intended to shield her from the wedding plans.

"This is Maxim," her father was saying. "Well, that's not his full name – I think it is Alex Dimity..."

"Alexei Dmitry Immanuel Maximilian Konstantinovich," said Maxim quietly. "But my friends call me Maxim, and I would like it if you would."

Anne watched Meredith carefully, but she did nothing but blink silently from behind Sir Thomas.

"Well then," said Anne briskly. "That part is over, the announcement is made."

Maxim placed his hand on hers. "I think this has been sufficiently uncomfortable for everyone. Sir Thomas, Miss Meredith, my future bride and I are leaving."

"L-Leaving?" Sir Thomas spluttered.

Anne stared. "Where are we going?"

Maxim smiled, and something lurched in Anne's stomach. "Not far, I promise you. I think we have spent enough time in this stuffy

court and I could do with fresh air.”

The thought of escaping the stares and gossip around her was enticing.

“Meredith, stay with Papa.”

The girl nodded, and Anne sighed as she and Maxim left the hot room.

“Thank you.”

Maxim stared, confusion across his features as they walked down a corridor. “For what?”

“For rescuing me from those stares,” she said heavily as they stepped outside. “I cannot bear it.”

He laughed and squeezed her hand. “My dear Annika, you will need to become accustomed to that when you are a Czarina.”

She could not help but laugh, it was so ridiculous – but that laugh became a gasp as she saw two beautiful horses, just waiting to be ridden.



* * *

A rush of warmth suffused across Maxim’s body as he watched Anne smile. When was the last time he had brought such joy to anyone?

“Oh, they are beautiful,” she breathed.

Maxim watched her gently release her hand from his arm, and move quietly and without sudden jerks towards them. It was evident that she was not only an excellent horsewoman, but one who appreciated the steeds for their own merits. Instead of rushing towards them, allowing her own excitement to overwhelm her, she moved slowly, allowing them to move towards her curiously.

“Thunder and Lightning,” he said with a smile.

Anne turned back to look with laughter in her eyes. “You did not honestly name them that?”

Maxim shook his head. "They are court horses, but I have befriended them over the last few weeks. I have been desperate for a good ride for a while, and I thought it would be a good chance to escape the court, if only for a little bit."

Her eyes shone, illuminating her beauty even more. "You read my mind. Come, help me up."

"You cannot ride in that gown," he protested, moving forward.

"Nonsense," she said decidedly. "Any woman who cannot ride in a day gown should not call herself a rider. Come on."

Maxim grinned. Here was a woman who was more than a match for him, then. As he reached out to help her mount Lightning, their hands touched. It was more than a frisson this time, more than just coincidence. Anne's body made his own come alive, and it looked like he was not alone – Anne's cheeks were pink and her eyes wide.

Did she feel as he did? Was she also wondering how far they could take this wild dance? Could this engagement of convenience simply become something real?

Maxim coughed as Anne settled herself in the saddle. He must not get too ahead of himself. The last thing he wanted to do was spook her, like a wild horse.

Pulling himself onto Thunder, he clicked his steed with his ankles and Anne followed suit, moving their horses outside the inner courtyard and beyond the limits of St. James' Court.

Already, knowing that she was moving further and further away from the stares of the gossips and the focus of polite society, it was clear that Anne was feeling better. The tension in her face was gone, and as a breeze tugged at her hair, she smiled and closed her eyes.

Maxim smiled. "This is for you."

Reaching into a saddlebag, he pulled out a box, wrapped in brown paper with a gold ribbon.

Anne stared at it. "What is the occasion?"

"Occasion?" Maxim shook his head with a wry smile. "It is almost Christmas, and if I cannot get my betrothed a present five days before Christmas, then what is the point?"

Blushing prettily, Anne reached over and pulled Lightning to a stop as she opened it. Her eyes were fixed on the gift, but Maxim could not take his eyes from her face.

Her mouth opened as she pulled out an elegant riding cloak. "Oh, Maxim!"

"I thought you would like it," he said, a little hoarsely. Pulling Thunder close and steadying him, he reached out and brought the cloak around her, fastening it with fumbling fingers.

"Thank you," Anne breathed. The moment was taut with restraint, and she looked a little uncomfortable as she said, "but...I do not have a gift for you."

Maxim chuckled. "We Russians celebrate Christmas completely differently to you English, anyway, so I would not worry. We celebrate much later, January the seventh."

He pulled away, conscious that if he stayed much closer, he would be unable to resist the temptation of those pink lips.

"I did not know that," Anne said breathlessly, clicking her horse into action.

"Yes, the New Year is far more important than Christmas," he said, attempting to keep his attention on his words. "We fast for forty days before Christmas Eve, and the day is full of feasting, story-telling, even telling fortunes."

"Fortune telling?"

He could hear the interest in her voice, and grinned. "Why, would you like to know your fortune, Annika?"

Her eyes dropped and her cheeks darkened. "Perhaps. Meredith's, certainly. I would like to know she will be happy. B-But that is of no consequence – your Christmas celebrations sound vastly different to ours."

Maxim followed her, trying to focus on their route rather than her beauty. "I have had to adapt in the few months I have been here, but nothing like how quickly you have adapted to Lightning. 'Tis like you have known her all your life!"

Anne laughed, and it was a true laugh now, with no concerns or self-consciousness. "A country girl who doesn't know her way around a new horse isn't worth anything."

"Ah, so you are not a city dweller then?" Maxim found himself asking. Suddenly, knowing all about Anne, everything about her, felt especially important.

"No, I am from a small town in Kent that no one in London has ever heard of," she said with a smile. "We are not far from London, but I have to say I much prefer the countryside."

"If I had not promised your father we would stay at St. James' Court, you could have shown it to me."

Anne glanced at him, as though attempting to decipher whether

he was jesting with her or not, but she seemed convinced of his sincerity. "I would like to show you, one day. The marshes are beautiful, especially when the mists are rising in the morning. I often see them when I visit Mrs Patterson each morning. She has lost her sight, poor thing, and her daughter is in service over ten miles away. I help with her sewing."

It was impossible not to hear the wistfulness in her voice. "You miss your home."

Anne jerked from her reverie and smiled a little awkwardly. "Well, who would not? You must miss your family, and the places you grew up."

Maxim swallowed. Why did it come so quickly, this instinct to lie, to hide the truth? It was an innocent question after all, one that she would probably not think twice about saying to any acquaintance.

But he was not just someone she had met. He was a Czar, and telling her anything could not just reveal his secret, but perhaps put her in the most dangerous of plots.

"If you do not wish to speak of it," Anne's voice cut through his thoughts, "you do not have to."

Maxim glanced over and saw her smile gently. There was surely no danger in telling the truth here. While Édouard would surely tell him to beware any woman – he had been caught that way before – Anne's enquiry was innocent.

"I certainly miss the winters," he said, his throat feeling strangely dry as they turned and started making their way back to St. James' Court. "You do not have real winter here in England, I think. No icicles hanging from your nose when you step outside, no mountains."

"Icicles on your nose?"

"In the depths of winter, you would be lucky to get away with that," Maxim said with a wry smile. "And in the palace I grew up in, the winter palace, we would have fires in every room just to keep out the chill."

Just one glance told him all he needed to know.

"It really is disgraceful, you know," he quipped. "My own future bride not believing me."

Anne laughed in turn. "You do not actually think we will get married, do you?"

The words 'of course not' were on the tip of his tongue when a

cloud moved and sunlight lit up Anne's entire face. Maxim's breath caught in his throat. She was perfection, and she had been handed to him on a plate. He would be mad to walk away from her – mad!

“Are you quite well, Maxim?” Anne's voice was close by and he blinked. She had moved closer, halting her mare beside his horse. “You look very strange.”

Maxim looked around them. They were alone.

Dropping his reins, he reached out and caressed Anne's cheek before pulling her face towards him. She did not resist, her lips meeting his with just as much passion as that which he poured down upon them.

If they had not been mounted on different horses, it could have been different. As it was, Maxim was unable to pull her into his arms, but if anything that just made the kiss more tender.

Eventually, they broke apart.

“I must not get accustomed to this treatment,” Anne breathed, her blue eyes searching his. “When we announce the end of our engagement on Christmas Day, I may end up missing you.”

Maxim swallowed. “I know I will miss you even if we decided to end the engagement now.”

She stared, as though attempting to decipher any secret meaning in his words, and then she chuckled gently and moved her horse forwards.

“Your Czar charm won't fool me.”

Maxim watched her back as she rode ahead of him, and then remembered he needed to be moving too and touched Thunder into action.

“Yes,” he said, awkwardly. “Czar charm.”

6

“Absolutely not.”

“But – ”

“No buts,” Anne said firmly. “I promised one more story, and how many more did I read?”

Meredith, eyelids drooping with tiredness, muttered, “Two.”

“Two,” repeated Anne, unable to keep the smile from her face. “And now you have to go to sleep.”

Meredith’s bed chamber was dark, with a single candle lit on her bedside table, but it was enough to make every pearl on Anne’s court gown shimmer.

“It is not fair,” pouted Meredith, a small frown puckering her forehead. “Why can you go to balls, and parties, and see princes and kings, and I have to go to bed?”

Anne smiled this time. “Because I am far older, and far wiser.”

For some reason, this response seemed to concern the younger girl. “But what if I get older without getting any wiser?”

“Then you will have to pay far more attention to your tutor when we return home,” Anne said gently. She had not intended this to be a lecture; she was late already to meet her father, and if she did not hurry, he was going to start to fret.

“I hate Miss McPhearson!”

“I know,” said Anne soothingly, brushing back Meredith’s hair from her face, “but you need to learn things if you are going to be wise. Come on now, I will blow out the candle.”

But her hand was stayed by one a little smaller than hers. “Were you wise when you were my age?”

A twinge of awkwardness pulled at Anne’s heart, but she attempted to brush past it. “Absolutely not! I had to grow up before I was wise enough to attend balls.”

And even then, a small voice said in her mind, you were not really wise enough, were you?

Kissing Meredith and tucking her in tightly, Anne smiled at the drowsy child and whispered, “Sweet dreams.”

She picked up the candle and by the time she shut the door

behind her, Meredith's breathing had already slowed to slumberland.

Anne leaned against the door. It was getting harder as Meredith got older, but she had known that would happen. Any little girl without a mother was going to become a handful, but at some point, Meredith would need to know.

She swallowed back the emotion threatening to fall from her eyes. If only her mother had lived. Anne would have someone to talk to then, a woman who could guide her during this difficult time.

But this was getting her nowhere. Taking a deep breath, she smoothed down her gown and tried to ignore the stiffness in the bodice. She cannot stay here, standing outside Meredith's bed chamber. She has to go to the court ball, and be seen with Maxim.

Not that that was a hardship! Why, just yesterday when they had gone horse riding, every moment with him had been intoxicating. The mere thought of ever going horse riding again, to try and share that closeness, was madness.

She need not have concerned herself with her father missing her, at any rate. As Anne entered the ballroom, she was forced into a corner by the sheer number of people. Sir Thomas was a few yards away chatting animatedly to someone who looked like a duke, and Maxim was nowhere to be seen.

Disappointment caught at her throat, making it sore. Maxim had spent the day not with her, but waiting for a royal audience with Prinny. She had not realised it was possible to feel the lack of someone you had only met a few days before, but he was...

Well. Anne swallowed and tried to plaster a smile on her face. He was starting to become the reason she got out of bed in the morning. He was far more vibrant, interesting, and stimulating than anyone she had ever met.

After years of boredom and monotony, helping her father to raise Meredith, Maxim was a wonderful distraction – even if he was going to disappear once Christmas Day arrived.

Suddenly, a wave of loneliness washed over her. She would be so alone once they returned to Romney with just Meredith and her father.

Perhaps it would be better if she just married Maxim...

Anne pushed away the thought as she spotted a handsome man in more gold finery than was good for him dancing on the other

side of the room.

Dancing – with another woman!

Hot fiery anger flooded through her veins, and something that tasted very much like jealousy rose in her stomach. What did Maxim think he was doing, dancing with another woman?

As quickly as the emotions had come, Anne forced them down. She was not a jealous woman as a general rule, and she does not like it – but she liked the way that Maxim was smiling at that another woman even less.

A gaggle of chucking gentlemen moved past her at such speed that Anne was forced to take a step back. She could not truly be falling in love with Maxim, could she?

That would be ridiculous. The last thing she should be doing was opening her heart to another, particularly someone like Maxim. How many other women had he seduced on the journey to here from Russia?

Anne swallowed. Falling in love; she knew where that could lead, and it did not lead to happiness.

In that moment, Maxim spotted her. His eyes lit up, even from this far across the ballroom, and without saying another word to his partner, he bowed and then left her standing in the dance.

The young woman stared, evidently outraged. She was forced to step back and allow the other dancers – those who still had partners – to continue on.

A flash of pleasure roared into Anne's heart but she pushed it away just as sternly. It was wrong to find pleasure in another person's disappointment, surely?

Maxim had reached her, clicking his heels and kissing her hand, which made Anne smile.

"My lady," he said in his deep, calming voice. "I thought I would never gain the pleasure of looking at you today, and so you have given me the greatest gift possible. Here is a small attempt to make amends."

In her hand he placed a small box, wrapped in brown paper and with a silver ribbon.

Anne could not help but laugh at his sparkling eyes and way with words. "Another gift? What is it?"

Maxim's smile matched hers. "You will have to open it to see."

It took only a minute to pull the ribbon and wrappings away, and Anne gasped as two large diamond earrings appeared inside the

box.

Her eyes grew. "I-I cannot accept these."

"Of course you can."

Anne looked up. Maxim's face was diffused with pleasure, but as she looked down at the earrings, a sense of just what a dangerous dance they were weaving came over her.

"Maxim," she managed to say, "these must be worth –"

"You are my future bride," he said magnanimously. "You must have diamonds!"

Pulling them out of the box, Maxim leaned forward to place them in her ears. "Besides," he whispered, his breath caressing her neck, "it is expected."

Anne turned her head slightly as he placed the first earbob in her ear, and saw Prinny watching them, muttering to one of his companions. As she turned her head in the other direction, her father came into view. He was nodding approvingly.

Anne worked hard not to roll her eyes. Always watched, always putting on a performance. Did Maxim never grow tired of it?

"And now, I would like to dance with you," Maxim said impressively. "Come, I think they are making up a new set."

Anne glanced over to the dancers. "I...I have not danced in public for a while. You will have to forgive any mistakes."

Maxim took her by the hand, which he squeezed as they walk over. "Why not?"

Thankfully, it was possible for Anne to ignore this question, as by the time they had reached the set, the dance was about to begin.

Maxim held out his hand. "My lady."

A shiver of anticipation flowed through Anne's entire body, and as their hands touched, heat seared along her fingers. There was something about Maxim; something she could not explain, but her body seemed to know.

Weaving in and out of the other dancers, Anne did not take her eyes from him, and his gaze never left her. It was as though they were the only ones in the room, the only people in the world. Anne felt her breath catch in her chest every time they came close together, and the temptation to lean in and steal a kiss, even before all the court...

"I want to kiss you," murmured Maxim as they came together, their hands interlinked. "And I know you want it."

Desire thrilled through her as she stared into his dark eyes, a

smile dancing on her lips. "How could you possibly know that?"

Maxim smiled. "I know."

It was fortunate for Anne that the dance ended at that moment, and gentle applause rang out around them, as it drowned out the half-formed thought that escaped her lips.

"I think I am falling – "

"I shall get you a drink, my lady," Maxim said with a grin. "'Tis warm in here, it is not?"

And with that, he was gone.

Anne breathed out and tried to calm her beating heart. He was everything she had ever hoped for – no, had ceased to hope for. She could never have expected any gentleman like this would ever want her.

"Miss Anne Marsh."

She turned to see who had spoken, and was immediately accosted by a well-dressed elderly gentlewoman who was frowning.

Anne curtsied low. She did not have to know who this woman is to see it would be ungracious not to give her all the deference of a queen.

The lady looked a little mollified as she said, "Lady Romeril. I thought in incumbent upon me, Miss Marsh, as you have no mother, to warn you about that man."

With her last two words, Lady Romeril pointed her fan towards Maxim.

Anne's cheeks darkened as she said, "My lady, I do not – "

"He is a ruffian," Lady Romeril said decidedly. "A wild gentleman, one with a secret no one can discover. I know that your little tête-à-tête was indelicately disturbed and you had no choice but to announce your engagement – "

Anne stared. Who was this woman, to walk up to her so forcefully, in the middle of St. James' Court, and speak to her this way?

"– but you are not the only one, of course," continued Lady Romeril with a wink. "Why, I remember Lord Romeril and I, at the Duke of Axwick's ball – not the incumbent, of course, his grandfather, who from memory – "

"Lady Romeril," Anne interrupted, praying her cheeks would remain calm, "you must excuse me."

"Oh. I see." Lady Romeril's eyes narrowed as she pointed a wrinkled finger at her. "Just you remember what I have said, Miss.

A ruffian. A trickster. I pray you avoid him, Miss Marsh.”

Without another word, she disappeared into the crowd, leaving Anne with nothing but intrigue and curiosity – probably a quite different impact than the one Lady Romeril had intended.

“Who was that?”

Anne jumped. Maxim had appeared by her side with two glasses of something, and her cheeks flamed to think of what Lady Romeril had just been saying.

A gentleman with a secret...

“Let us take some air outside, and cool down,” she said quietly. “It is far too hot in here.”

Maxim took one look at her and seemed to understand. “Of course.”

He proffered his arm which Anne took gratefully. Anything to be out of this *mêlée*, where they were evidently being watched and gossiped about, if Lady Romeril was any indication.

As they reached the door, Maxim whispered something to a footman, who nodded and disappeared down a corridor. Within a few seconds he had caught them up as they reached the outside door. There was a fur coat in his hands, and he handed it with a bow to Anne.

“You have made a mistake. That is not mine, it is – ”

“My lady,” said the footman, with a nervous glance at Maxim. “I was instructed to – ”

“Give it here, man,” said Maxim easily, and nodded at the footman. “Off you go.”

The servant bowed gratefully and disappeared into the gloom.

“Here, put this on.”

Anne stared as he placed the fur coat around her shoulders. “Where did you get this?”

Maxim smiled, his breath billowing in the cold night air as they stepped outside. “Why, ‘tis one of mine. Did you think I had it stolen?”

Anne laughed nervously, pulling the warm coat around her. A small part of her had wondered, and she hated that her instincts had played her false. Why should she believe Maxim could not provide something as simple as a winter coat?

“Now, tell me,” said Maxim in a low voice, pulling her arm into his once more. “You are a beautiful woman, Annika – no, do not dissemble – and witty, and charming. Why have you not been

married before?”

Anne hesitated. Was this the moment to tell him the truth?

“All women have secrets,” she said lightly. “And this is one I am not yet willing to share. Tell me a little more about your family. How is it possible that you are the heir to be a Czar, and yet you are here?”



* * *

Maxim had known this question would be coming – it was always asked eventually. So why did he find his tongue utterly unable to repeat the same old excuses he had trotted out for everyone else?

Could Anne be trusted? He felt closer to her than anyone else in the world, and yet that was not saying much. It was incredible to think they had only met four days before.

Anne Marsh was everything he could ever have wanted in a woman, but could it all be over in another four days?

It seemed madness now, to think that they could be nothing to each other in a few days.

“I have no wish to force a confidence from you.” Her words were light, her breathing billowing out into the freezing air. “I am not the sort of person who would attempt it.”

Maxim smiled. “I know. ‘Tis a long story, and I have no wish to bore you, but a short history should suffice.”

In the thin candlelight that escaped through the curtains of the court, he could just make out her expression as they walked around the walls, and it was trusting. Maxim swallowed. It would be wrong of him indeed to put this woman in danger. Not when he was starting to find his heart just as desperate for her as his loins.

“My father had two wives,” he said slowly. “It is not uncommon in Russia, to have a wife recognised by the church and then another recognised by common law. I am the eldest son of his first wife, but

they had a disagreement when I was thirteen years old. My mother...disappeared."

He glanced at Anne, who was staring. "Disappeared?"

Maxim shrugged. He would not dwell on this; he would not allow the pain of those years to return. "She went for a walk in the snow, and never returned. A year later, my father's second wife became his wife in church, and their eldest son, one of my half-brothers, became the heir. I was disowned, and the line of Czardom moved to Dmitri. The throne of Russia should have come to me three years ago, but the disagreements within my family line forced the court to choose another cousin for the crown."

There was silence beside him, and as he looked into Anne's face, she looked nothing like he had expected. Even a little...sceptical?

"I would have thought news such as that would be in the papers," she said slowly, not meeting his gaze. "Such a huge injustice, and in a royal family."

"Are you questioning my story?" Maxim could not keep the words in, his shock was so great. "Questioning a Czar?"

Even in this dim light, he could see Anne's cheeks flush. "It is not in my nature to say what a person wants to hear, but merely what is on my mind."

Her honesty slowed down his rapidly beating heart, and softened his irritation. "Of course," he said quietly. "'Tis the first time you have heard the story, and so it is natural for you to be a little curious. I admire that quality in you, truly. I hope you will always be that honest with me."

"Really?" Anne did meet his gaze now, and she was smiling as she teased, "Even if that is to say that I do not wish to marry you?"

Maxim laughed, but it did not cover the pain that wrenched through his stomach. The idea that she could say no to him...

"Well," said Anne quietly as they turned a corner. "No matter what the truth is, by claiming to be a Czar publicly, you certainly have everyone talking."

He could not prevent a smile creeping over his face. "That is half the fun."

Maxim could feel the tension in Anne's arm and wondered whether he had made a mistake. When she spoke, he knew he had.

"Tell me truly, Maxim – I must know. Are you just a...a confidence trickster? Someone out for what they can get, with no thought to the consequences?"

Anne's voice was full of nerves and when Maxim stopped walking, she looked up with a strange expression on her face.

"What answer do you want?" Maxim whispered, her arm still in his. "What do you want to be true?"

Anne licked her lips and Maxim felt a tug in his stomach he knew all too well. "I do not know," she said quietly. "The idea that you are a Czar, or a prince in disguise...it is a heady thought. But I do not want to be lied to, secrets or no secrets."

Before Maxim could answer, a loud noise wrenched through the silence of the night – a large black dog, tied to a chain affixed into the wood, bounded up to them, snarling, dribble falling from its teeth.

Anne stumbled backwards in terror but Maxim's arms reached out and caught her, pulling her several steps back around the corner they had just turned. Her hands scrabbled at him in terror and he caught sight of her face, absolutely terrified.

"I have you," he said quickly, "it cannot get you – you are safe with me, Annika."

Anne leaned against the wall, breathing heavily, and Maxim tried to ignore the visceral effect that rescuing her and seeing her so breathless had on his body.

"Annika?"

The moment their eyes met, her breathing started to slow. "You saved me."

Maxim chuckled as he pushed a lock of hair which had escaped her pins behind her ear. "Only from a dog."

But that did not seem to matter to Anne, who whispered, "Kiss me."

He needed no further invitation. He crushed her against the wall, his lips ravishing her own, and he almost cried out with the pleasure of it. The sensation of her under his body, pressed up against him, her fingers pulling him closer, her breasts pushed into his chest – there was no one like Annika, no one like her at all.

"Oh, Maxim," she moaned as his lips moved to her neck, kissing a trail down to her ears.

"Annika," he whispered, before reaching for her hands and pinning them to the wall, trying not to cry out with pleasure as she arched against him.

"Oi, who goes there?"

They broke apart in an instant as a gentleman forced a lamp into

their faces. Annika turned away, desperate not to be identified.

Maxim laughed gruffly. "I should have known we would be caught," he said ruefully, pulling out his pocketbook. "You seem like a very conscientious man, sir. Here, a pound for your trouble."

He placed the paper note in the man's hand, and within a moment, he and his lamp were gone.

Annika was still leaning against the wall, but she was smiling now. "We have got to stop being caught...kissing."

Maxim saw the flush of pleasure still on her cheeks, and nodded. "Of course – but first..."

He moved forward and she moved to meet him, desperate for his touch once more. A little more kissing would not do any harm.

Anne watched the flickering light on the ceiling, as someone with a candle or lamp walked past her room. The curtains were not fully pulled together, and the light danced across the white paint as thoughts danced across her mind.

Well, not exactly thoughts. Images of herself and Maxim, dancing across the ballroom at St. James Court, flashed across her mind. His hand on her arm. Her hand in his. His fingers brushing her cheeks before he kissed her...

Anne swallowed and turned over. When was the last time she had felt this way? She could barely remember – it had been years ago.

And it had not been like this. That had been a childish crush, an obsession which she had not really understood nor interrogated.

These feelings were those of a woman.

Maxim smiled in her memory and Anne shivered. Just the thought of him made her feel more alive than ever had done. He made her feel powerful, more certain of herself. More certain than she had ever felt.

"We have got to stop being caught...kissing."

"Of course – but first..."

The pressure to continuously apologise for her thoughts and actions disappeared whenever she was with him. Was it his smile, his charm, or just his gentle acceptance of her?

She smiled in the darkness. It certainly was not his Czardom, a palace and crown. Whatever it was, she was drawn into him and could not, would not fight the desire to be with him.

A clock chimed somewhere. It was one o'clock in the morning.

Anne sighed, pulling her feet over the side of the bed and striking a tinder box, the flame almost blinding her. She lit the solitary candle by her bed, picking up a book. She turned more than five pages before throwing it down. Not a single word had sunk in.

Marriage was an estate she had entirely given up, long before she had met Maxim – but his presence here, this engagement of convenience that they had contrived...was it the final chance she

would ever have to be a wife? Or at least, to experience a little of that intimacy and closeness that a wife would feel?

Dark and wild thoughts rolled around her imagination and she licked her lips. Genteel ladies do not have such thoughts, she knew that. But she was not ignorant of the way a gentleman and a lady... enjoyed each other.

The conflict warred inside her for another ten minutes, and then she stood up resolutely. The fur coat Maxim had brought her was lying on a chair by the door. Pulling it around her shoulders, it took her only another few minutes before she was standing outside Maxim's bed chamber.

Anne took a deep breath. There was still time to return to her own room. But would she be able to live with the regret?

Maxim was in a chair by the fire, a thoughtful expression on his face, but as he turned to look at Anne as she closed the door he smiled lazily.

"You appear to have been expecting me," Anne said in a whisper. Why was her voice so weak, at the very moment when she needed to speak?

"I was not," he said quietly.

Anne swallowed. She was not entirely sure what she had expected, but it was not this. "I...I wanted to see you."

"Of course," Maxim said, his eyes focused on her. "And I have been thinking of you all evening, too."

Warmth flooded through Anne's veins. Here was a gentleman who understood her, far better than anyone else she had ever met.

"We are very well suited," she said aloud, taking a step into the room. "It is almost as though you can read my thoughts. What a shame you are teasing the court about your Czardom, and it would be reckless of me to marry you."

Maxim laughed. "Come, sit by the fire."

This was it, she thought. The last opportunity to disappear. But she did not want to. This was the opportunity she had hoped for; the chance to ask for what she really wanted.

"You know, this marriage of convenience that I and your father have contrived," Maxim spoke softly as Anne curled up in a chair opposite him. "It is starting to appear far more interesting than I thought."

Anne could feel her heart thundering in her chest, but said lightly, "It is almost as though we are each other's Christmas

presents.”

He chuckled. “Remember, you can leave me under the tree on Christmas Day if you do not want me.”

She could not help but laugh at that, especially as she could not think of anything less likely to happen. Why, he was far more likely to leave her...

“Now, why do you think I am going to leave you?” Maxim’s dark eyes were shrewd. “You have given me no reason to want to leave you – and every reason to want to stay with you.”

Anne licked her lips unconsciously at the very thought of him, and he groaned.

“Damnit, Annika. You come to my bed chamber at a ridiculous time in the morning, looking as you do...anyone would think you were after something.”

Her heart now beating so heavily she could almost hear it in her ears, Anne swallowed. This was it: the moment when she had to say something, or she would regret it for the rest of her life.

“Actually...” she started, but her words seemed to disappear. How could she explain what she wanted, her desire for him, her desire to be touched by him in every way, without revealing herself to be a scandalous woman?

But once again, Maxim seemed to understand her. “If...if you are suggesting what I think you are suggesting, Annika, you must know that there are serious consequences to...making love...before we are wed.”

Anne’s skin tingled all over just at his words. “We could be careful.”

He examined her closely, and then seemed to decide he could speak. “Well, yes, I have preservatives. But that is not entirely what I meant. You would lose your innocence, Annika, something you cannot take back. I would not want to ruin you for any other gentleman, if you decided not to have me on Christmas Day.”

Her cheeks had darkened at the word innocence, but spoke honestly when she said, “I am unlikely to marry anyone else, Maxim. I only came to St. James Court this Season to appease my father. One last Season, and then he would stop forcing me into society. I just wanted to spend my life quietly in Romney, with Meredith.”

“And your father?”

“Yes, of course,” she said quickly. “But...but that does not

change what we could do tonight. Could experience, together.”

Try as she might, Anne could not hold his searching gaze.

After a few minutes, Maxim sighed and a charming smile fell across his face. “Well, you strike a difficult bargain – or at least, you would, if I did not want you so badly.”

He rose so swiftly and pulled her upright so fast that Anne gasped aloud – but the gasp did not continue. His lips captured hers and utterly possessed her, his arms reaching around and pulling her tightly into his embrace.

Anne lost herself in the feelings. She had never felt anything like this – Maxim’s strength, his passion, his devotion could all be felt in the way his tongue teased pleasure from hers.

“Oh,” she moaned, unable to help herself. The sound seemed to stir something in him, his self-control disappearing.

“Annika, I want you,” he growled, pulling away to stare into her eyes. “Do you trust me?”

Did she trust him? She would have followed him to the moon and back.

Unable to put her feelings for him into words, Anne nodded.

With another growl that sounded almost animal, Maxim lifted her up and carried her over to the bed, throwing her onto it. Anne felt the softness of the linen beneath her and looked up into the face of the gentleman that she would give anything to. She wanted him. She loved him.

“I have wanted to do this from the moment I first met you,” Maxim whispered, his eyes not leaving hers as his hands pulled at the buttons on his shirt. “I promise you, we will make love afterwards – but first...”

His voice trailed away as he unbuttoned his breeches and pulled them off.

Anne gasped. What was she doing? Lying here, on Maxim’s bed, in the middle of St. James’ Court – and she did not need any further explanation of what was standing before her.

Maxim smiled. Was there a hint of nervousness there?

“You can tell me to stop at any time,” he said quietly, reaching for something in a chest at the foot of the bed, utterly naked, and then pulling on a preservative over his manhood. “You know that, Annika? At any point, and I will stop.”

Anne nodded. She did not trust her voice. She was about to experience something incredible, and hopefully a little pleasure.

But she could never have predicted what came next. Maxim kicked aside the chest, and grabbing her ankles, pulled her towards him. Anne gasped as her skirts, caught on the bed linens, were pulled up to her knees – but they did not stop there.

Maxim's dark eyes did not leave hers as his strong hands pushed her skirts further up, his fingertips grazing the inside of her thighs. Anne moaned, she could not help herself, and once again her vocal pleasure pushed him over the edge.

Pulling her undergarments off, Maxim seemed to hesitate. He was looking at her as though she was a delicate flower.

"I am ready," she breathed. "Trust me."

He swallowed. "You are an innocent, I do not want to hurt you."

Anne tried not to smile. "You won't. Damn it, Maxim, make love to me."

Something flickered over his face, pushed her legs apart roughly and in a swift moment, plunged his manhood inside her.

Anne screamed with the intensity of the ecstasy and he froze.

"I have hurt you?"

Anne looked up with desire hazed eyes. "More. Harder."

He did not need further invitation. Reaching out, he pinned her hands by her head and took possession of her lips with his own as he plunged himself into her, slowly at first, building the pressure inside her.

Anne writhed, the sensual ecstasy rising in her, that heat in her stomach moving lower, her whole body on fire for him.

"I want to see you come," Maxim whispered, tearing his lips from hers and gazing deeply into her eyes. "First I ride you, then I will make love to you. Lose yourself in the pleasure, Annika..."

And she did. Anne closed her eyes as the bliss built to such a pitch she could not think, only feel, and her whole body rocked as the pleasure exploded around her.

Maxim immediately stopped, panting heavily and grinning when she opened her eyes. "My my, Annika, you know what you like. I had to be careful there. Now –"

"Now," interrupted Anne, breathlessly, hardly able to believe what she was about to say, "you have ridden me. It's time that I rode you."

With a strength she never would have believed, she tipped Maxim over so he was lying on the bed and she was straddling him.

Anne swallowed. She had never done this before, but how

difficult could it be? She had ridden a horse, hadn't she?

Maxim's eyes widened. "R-Ride?"

Anne did not answer. Instead, she lowered herself onto his hot manhood, preservative still thankfully intact, and moaned as she felt him fill her up.

"*Khristos zhiv*," Maxim murmured. "Christ alive, Annika, you know what I want."

She did. Every instinct in her knew what he wanted – but she was not going to give it to him so easily.

Still mounted upon him and smiling down at him, Anne very slowly rocked backwards and forwards without moving up and down, but as she gazed into his eyes, she started to untie her gown.

Maxim's eyes closed and his hands twitched. "Annika, God I want you – give me what I want."

"No," she murmured, revelling in the power she had over him. "No, this time we are going to do it my way."

It was a delicious five minutes of gently teasing him before she was totally naked. If she had been concerned he would not appreciate her nude body, she was wrong. Maxim surprised her by sitting up, his mouth eagerly closing around one breast and his hand worshipping the other.

Anne arched her back, desperate for more, and only then did she start to gently rise and spear herself onto his manhood.

Maxim fell back, his eyes closed, hands on her hips. "Yes, oh Annika, faster!"

She could feel the heat building in her again, but she would not give him satisfaction that easily.

"No," she said with a smile, hardly able to keep her voice steady. "My pleasure first."

She took it, twice, her body exploding around him each time, her voice unable to remain quiet, until finally Maxim had clearly had enough.

"Annika, I will have you," he growled, twisting so that she fell back into the soft linens.

His mouth captured hers as he built a steady, hard rhythm, Anne twisting in the bed to allow him in deeper.

"I wanted you," she gasped, "ever since – "

"And I wanted you," he groaned. "Annika, I want this every day, I want you every day."

"And you can have me," Anne smiled. "Every day, whenever you

want. Just give me – oh!”

Maxim shouted out with her this time, their ecstasy in glorious union, and as Anne’s body rocked with her fifth orgasm, he ploughed into her and exploded into pleasure.



* * *

Maxim tried to pull breath into his lungs, but no matter how much air he took in, it was not enough.

Dear God, that it was possible to experience something like that, a closeness, an intimacy, a pleasure like that with a woman – and all the same woman!

He glanced at her, dark hair wild and her own breathing heavy. Annika Marsh. She is everything he could have wanted, everything he could have imagined.

How was it possible that she knew not only how to please him, but also to take her own pleasure?

She was the perfect woman; all the elegance of the English with all the fire of the Russians. If he did not have a Czardom to claim, he would sneak her across London to a little Orthodox chapel he knew, and marry her immediately.

“This cannot be real.”

Her words were soft, breathed rather than spoken, and he laughed as he pulled her closer.

“I have to be honest,” he said quietly, “I was more worried that you would be in pain than in pleasure.”

“I have never,” she began, and then hesitated before continuing in a less controlled voice, “never experienced anything...anything like this.”

If he had heard words like that from anyone else – and if he were honest, he had – he would have found his ego inflating, to know he had given such sensual delight to a lady.

But not with Annika. All he felt was relief, and joy that she had experienced ecstasy. She was important – far more important than he had realised before she had stepped into his room this evening.

Not only important, but precious. He felt honoured, as though he had been given a precious gift, that it had been he to give her that first experience of intimacy between a gentleman and a lady.

She shifted slightly in his arms, and Maxim could feel himself stiffen at the very thought of a repeat experience. No, he must be controlled. Though she was not sore now, she certainly would be if he took his pleasure and plunged into her again.

“Well,” Annika whispered, tracing an invisible line across his chest with a finger, “that was a secret worth knowing.”

Maxim smiled. “Plenty more where that one came from.”

She did not respond, her eyes lowered to watch her finger move.

He continued, “You must have secrets too, Annika, even if they are only little, womanly ones.”

“Every woman is entitled to her own secrets,” she said quietly.

Maxim nodded. “Of course, but you must remember that in the bedchamber, that is the perfect time to share secrets. Why, it is only the two of us, and neither of us will ever mention this to another. Consider it a Christmas gift to me. Tell me...”

His voice trailed away. He had glanced down, and Annika’s eyelashes had fluttered shut. Her breathing was steady, and he watched her slip into slumberland in his arms.

8

Anne rubbed her eyes. She knew there would be consequences to her night of passion with Maxim, but she had not expected it to be tired eyes and a slight headache.

"I do not need," she said quietly, and as calmly as she could manage, "a carriage with four horses."

"Of course you do," Sir Thomas said absentmindedly. "Now, the next thing we need to agree is –"

"No, we have not finished discussing the carriage," Anne interrupted with a sigh. She leaned back in her chair, and tried not to think too longingly of her own bed. "Father, four horses are such an extravagance, one we do not need. Why spend money when we do not even know whether this marriage is taking place!"

Her words fell on entirely deaf ears.

"Nonsense, no carriage? No horses?" Her father looked down at the copious piles of papers in his lap. "Now, somewhere I have the details of a farrier who –"

"Father, I do not want four horses and a carriage! I am hardly a duchess, I am just a gentlewoman from a small town in the country," Anne said fiercely. "And I am happy to be so! I do not wish to exhibit pretensions that others will think ridiculous!"

"You are the daughter of a baronet," Sir Thomas said, a little more focus in his eye as he found the piece of paper he was looking for. "You will not dishonour me in this, Anne."

"Dishonour you?" Anne stared at her father in disbelief. "Who is this wedding for, you or me?"

Her words startled him, but not in the way she had expected. "Then...then you are going to go through with the marriage?"

She hesitated. They were sitting alone in a corner of the Court, Meredith out playing with a kitchen girl who had not been needed that day. A smattering of snow fell past the window, and the fire blazed in the grate, as courtiers and visitors meandered and mingled.

She had spoken instinctively, without consideration, but now she stopped and examined her feelings...

This wedding, this marriage to Maxim...when had it ceased to be a sham in her eyes? In her heart? Was it the gifts, the way he smiled, the way he actually listened to what she said?

Or, and she blushed at the very thought, was it when she had been naked in his arms and known pleasure beyond anything she could have imagined?

It had only been a few hours ago. She had crept away before the sun had risen, and found her own bed cold and empty. Longing for him was not only sensual as she tried to get a few hours of sleep before the Court awoke. She had wanted him for the comfort of his arms around her.

They were but two days away from their marriage: the day before Christmas Eve. The idea that she would not go through with the wedding, it was ludicrous – not after what they had shared in his bed.

“I have wanted to do this from the moment I first met you.”

Maxim. He had made her feel safe, wanted, desired, free to ask for what she wanted. Could she have imagined a gentleman like him?

In the rare moments she had ever considered marriage, before this wild week at St. James’ Court, she had not imagined such joys, such easiness between her and her intended.

Her eyes moved around the room and as though unable to stay away, fell on Maxim. He was stood stiffly, resolutely, in his most formal wear, a few feet from Prinny who was discussing a gambling bet with a friend. The patience on Maxim’s face was stoic, but as their eyes met, he smiled.

Something fiery twisted in her stomach as she returned the smile. She could not help it. He was exactly what she had not dared to hope for in a gentleman, and he was all hers.

And it was not like anyone else would want to marry her...

The thought had passed through her mind before she could stop it. Why did she forbid herself the potential happiness that was before her? She could not think of herself like that. she was worthy of love, and while this engagement was a strange one, something she could never have predicted or sought, that did not mean she did not deserve it.

Did it?

“Anne, I am speaking to you!”

Anne jumped. Sir Thomas was staring with a slight frown across

his face, and she realised she had likely been completely ignoring him for the last few minutes, her mind so overwhelmed with thoughts.

“I apologise, Father,” she said quietly. “It is just...”

Her gaze was pulled inexorably towards Maxim again, who inclined his head to Sir Thomas.

Her father sighed. “My dear, we are attempting to plan this wedding, a wedding, may I remind you, which is only two days away.”

Anne nodded without taking her eyes from Maxim. How could she? He was everything she wanted, and after everything that happened, after the regret she had lived with for years, she was finally going to have something that was her very own.

“And then you will be married, and someone else’s problem.”

Anne turned to stare at her father, who looked a little defiant. “You...you almost sound as though you are relieved to be rid of me!”

“Any father would be,” Sir Thomas began, but he was not permitted to continue.

“Any father?”

“I did not mean it like that,” he said hurriedly, keeping his voice low. “Now, do not look at me like that, Annika. I am not ashamed of you, nor do I seek to lose you. But I do worry about you. Who will look after you when I am gone? Who will care for Meredith?”

Hot fire seemed to be burned through her veins as Anne tried to swallow down her bitterness. He was not a bad person. He was her father, and he knew her better than – well, a week ago she would have said anyone.

Now that Maxim and she had...

Anne swallowed. “I had hoped you would always be proud of me,” she said quietly, to ensure that no one else in the court would hear her words. “No matter what mistakes I have made in the past.”

Sir Thomas shook his head sadly. “Ah, Anne. You know that I love you, but your marriage will solve more than one problem, do you not see?”

She rose. “I see,” she said coldly. “This wedding is for you then, as I suspected. For you, and your honour, and to relieve you of me as a burden. I will see you later, Father.”

Ignoring his protestations, Anne stepped away from their chairs and strode across the room. A few gentlemen had to scuttle out of

her way, but she ignored their scandalised looks and the whispers moving around the room. Maxim had gone, and there was no one else she wished to speak to here.

The door to the corridor flew open and Anne almost ran through it – straight into the arms of Maxim.



* * *

Even from a distance, standing and waiting for Prinny to finish his banal conversation about a foolish bet he regretted, Maxim could see that Annika was upset. Was it the turn of her head, the lilt on her voice that carried over the crowd?

He could not tell, but every inch of him knew that she needed him. Maxim's eyes glanced at Prinny, and he hesitated. The royal regent was not always in attendance at St. James' Court. This was a perfect opportunity to speak with him, plead his case.

Annika's voice grew, still indistinct enough that he could not hear the exact words, but clearly in heightened distress.

Maxim's decision was made. Turning on his heels, he strode out of the room. If there was a time for another gift, then this was it.

As he moved to step back into the court, gift in his hand, he almost ran headlong into Annika herself.

"Ann – Miss Marsh, I..." Maxim's voice trailed away. If he did not know better, he would have said there were tears in her eyes. "Let us go for a walk."

He spoke so firmly that she simply nodded, taking his arm and allowing him to guide her through the corridors with festoons of Christmas decorations, into the cold air. Snow was starting to fall.

The pressure of her hand on his arm felt natural. As though it should have been there all along. How deep am I falling here, Maxim wondered. When did I start to not want this woman, but need her in my life?

Words seemed to fail him as they trod footsteps into the lightly fallen snow. What did one say to a woman who, mere hours ago, you had naked beneath you?

And yet there was no tension between them. If anything, the tension was leaving Annika; he could see her shoulders slacken. Just walking here, in silence, was wonderful. As though they were made for each other.

There were only a few people walking in the grounds of St. James' Court, kept inside undoubtedly due to the inclement weather.

Finally, she spoke. "You must think me very strange, Maxim."

"No," he countered gently. "Just upset."

Annika sighed heavily, her breath warm in the freezing air. "None of this seems real, do you think? I mean, it is Christmas Eve tomorrow, and then the next day..."

No words followed this statement. Whether from her words, or the freezing air around them, her cheeks had pinked.

"The next day is your wedding day," he said lightly, "if you choose it. Unless you have cold feet."

She laughed and looked down at her thin boots. "In only one sense, Maxim. Believe it or not, I...I am actually considering forcing you to marry me."

Relief and joy rushed through Maxim's body in equal measure. "You mean that?"

Her blue eyes glanced at him and she nodded.

Was this situation real? Maxim swallowed, trying to maintain his equilibrium as his emotions flew around inside him. This was not what he came here for, he came here to hide his secret and claim the Czardom that he was owed.

But would any of it mean anything, if he did not have Annika by his side?

"You had better prepare all of your medals, by the way," Annika was saying with a chuckle. "My father is planning the whole thing out to his satisfaction, and I think he would quite enjoy a military feel. You don't have any more, do you?"

"Medals?" Maxim shook his head. "I could always rustle up a few."

She grinned. "I think Father is far more interested in the preparations than I am."

"Well," said Maxim as they turned another corner, "I did say

that I would marry him if he asked me to.”

The sound of Annika’s laughter seemed to bounce off the frozen trees, giving the whole world a different light.

“He has always dreamed about walking me down the aisle,” she said confidently, “and it seems callous not to give him that opportunity.”

“And have you always dreamed of walking down the aisle?”

It felt like an innocent question – until the words were out of his mouth, and he saw the expression of fear on her face. Why did such a simple question provoke such a response?

“Once,” she said quietly. “But not for very long.”

Questions whirled in Maxim’s mind like the snow starting to pick up around him, but it was clear by Annika’s tone, and the way she refused to meet his eye, that this was not a conversation she would be drawn on.

Well, everyone should be allowed at least one secret. They were happy together, and it looked like nothing could stop their nuptials in just two days. What did a crush, years ago and with no consequences, matter to him?

Their walk took them down a long walkway. Coming towards them was a young lady, solitary, and dressed in the latest fashions. She had evidently ignored the Prince Regent’s desire for more formal attire.

About twenty yards before she met them, a gentleman appeared around a corner and shouted something. She stopped, waited for him to join her, and then kissed him full on the mouth before they started walking arm in arm.

“Good day,” the young lady said with a flirtatious smile.

“Good day,” Annika replied quietly, inclining her head.

Maxim looked back after a minute. “Who was that couple, and a very happily married couple they are too.”

“Not quite,” said Annika gently. “That is the Earl of Marnmouth and Miss Emma Tilbury.”

It took a moment for her words to sink in, and then Maxim turned back to take another look at them. They were no longer arm in arm, but standing in the path, kissing passionately as though the whole world had melted away.

“Miss Emma Tilbury?”

Annika nodded. “I believe Miss Tilbury has been the Earl’s mistress for a number of years.”

It was impossible to prevent the shock he felt from appearing on his face. "You cannot be serious. The Prince must not know – how else could he let such a woman here at Court?"

She laughed and tightened her grip on his arm. "Oh, Maxim, you do not know England as well as you thought. The Regent's entire world is about pleasure, and taking it where you can. Were there not mistresses in the Czar's court? Did your father not have two wives?"

The way she spoke, so relaxed, so casual, made Maxim hesitate. It was true, his own father had taken a second wife; but she had been a wife nonetheless, not a mistress. He knew it happened, even in the most regal of settings – but to have it so obviously flaunted...

"Well, I am glad at least that you kept your distance," he said faintly, his mind starting to move to other things. "A woman such as that here! We shall have to ensure she does not attend the wedding, Annika."

But she had removed her arm. "Why?"

"Why?" Maxim stared, and so only mild defiance in her face. "Annika, you cannot be serious?"

"No one can judge another for their decisions in life," she said simply. "You do not know her situation, what brought her to that arrangement with the Earl. It could have been the making of her – she could have started from somewhere much worse."

Maxim did not speak. No matter what she said, Annika seemed to know a little too much of this Miss Emma Tilbury, and he did not like the idea of his future wife consorting with a woman who evidently had no concerns of gossip, or morals, or....or decency!

"Do you know her?"

Annika blushed darkly, her cheeks flushed. "No, of course not! But any woman who does not abide by society is not necessarily wrong. Is it not possible that she is just different?"

Maxim took a deep breath. "You are a far gentler creature than I am, I will admit. Just remember, one day you will be a Czarina, and you will not be permitted to socialise with women like that!"

She laughed and cried, "A Czarina? Goodness, will that be my title?"

But he could hear the pain underneath the laughter. There was an untold story there, one that Annika clearly did not trust him enough to tell. But she would, in time.

After all, what kind of secret could she be hiding?

9

“Do not go too far, Meredith!”

Anne’s words were caught in the wind, not reaching the young girl who was giggling wildly and skipping away, making deep tracks in the snow. The St. James’ Court servants had decorated outside here, too. Garlands of winter roses adorned every door they passed.

Shaking her head with a smile, Anne followed her from a slight distance. She should have known – knew better than anyone, in fact, that you simply could not tell a girl what to do and expect to be obeyed. Not when the child was so like her mother.

Meredith was twelve, almost thirteen. It would not be long, a few years perhaps, and she would be tugging at the bit, desperate to be out there at card parties, balls, catching the eye of a gentleman or two.

Anne’s jaw clenched for a moment at the very thought. Meredith, fifteen or sixteen years of age, smiling coquettishly at a soldier. If only she could prevent her from making the same mistakes as her mother...

“Whoops!”

“Be careful, Meredith!” Anne frowned slightly as she watched Meredith pick herself up from the snow and brush down her gown. “If it is too icy out here, we should go inside!”

Meredith completely ignored her, running with her skirts flying as the sight of her kitchen maid friend appeared around a corner, giggling in turn.

“Wait for me!”

Anne’s face softened. It was rare for Meredith to find a playmate she could lose herself with, and they would be gone in less than a week. Best to let her play, and get all that energy out of her system. She could not come to real harm, hopefully.

“Just do not go too far, Meredith.”

Meredith ignored her. Same old, same old, Anne thought with a wry smile. She should have known.

“That child is almost like a wolf, running wild,” said a voice

behind her. "What a wonderful sight!"

Anne's wry smile grew into a broad one. She knew that voice. It was Maxim, surely – and when she turned around, she was not only correct, but saw him in a thick woollen coat holding a gift.

"It is Christmas Day tomorrow," she said lightly. "Do you not think that any more presents should wait until then?"

Maxim shook his head, his eyes bright. "No. I like giving gifts. You deserve them. It is simple to me."

Anne rolled her eyes. Was he always going to be so...well, guileless? It was not that she wanted a more complicated man – someone perhaps more likely to hurt her. But Maxim was so uncomplicated. Sometimes she thought she could see right through him.

Her cold gloved fingers scrabbled at the brown paper around what appeared to be a jewellery box.

Her eyes widened. "More jewels, Maxim?"

He laughed and opened it up gently. There, resting on blue velvet, was a delicate gold necklace absolutely dripping with diamonds.

"Oh, Maxim," she breathed.

"I knew you would like it," Maxim said softly, picking up the chain that rippled like water, and placing it around her neck. "And it matches those earrings I – ah, I see you are wearing them."

Anne's fingers moved to her ears, her cheeks blushing. "Yes, they are so beautiful, I did not want to leave them in our rooms."

"What are you wearing, Anne?"

A shy voice had piped up from just behind her. Anne started, turning to see Meredith staring at her curiously.

Her already pink cheeks darkened. A formal introduction with Meredith had been all the interaction Maxim had had, and this was not the time for further interaction – not when she was so close to their marriage day. What if Maxim did not like Meredith...or worse, what if she did not approve of him?

"Go and play with your friend, Meredith," she said, far more firmly than she felt. As she said the words, she noticed that her kitchen maid friend had come.

"But I want to see," Meredith insisted, her voice becoming a little stronger now. "Hannah had to go back, and I do not have anyone to play with. Please will you show me?"

Anne hesitated. Should she insist, send Meredith away? Was this

really the time for Meredith and Maxim to become acquainted? If only her Father was here, he would be able to extricate Meredith and end this situation entirely.

“‘Tis a necklace,” said Maxim softly. Anne turned to him, and saw he was smiling as he continued, “A gold necklace, with diamonds from where I was born.”

Anne’s eyes darted down to look at the beautiful necklace, which had gained even more importance in that moment. “From where you were born?”

Maxim nodded, and Meredith reached up to touch one of the diamonds. “Truly?”

“Where I come from, there is snow almost all of the year,” he said softly, leaning on his haunches to be closer to Meredith. “The sun sparkles down and makes the whole world glitter, and yet the snow does not melt. There is a fairy tale in my country that no matter how hard the sun tries, it can never melt the snow, because interspersed with the flakes of ice are diamonds.”

Meredith’s eyes were wide, and Anne smiled. Despite her advancing age, there was still much of the child in Meredith.

“Really?”

Maxim smiled. “Of course. But the really exciting part of the story comes later. Come, walk with us and I will tell you.”

Meredith’s gaze darted to Anne, who smiled. “Would you like to walk with us, Meredith?”

“Yes please,” the girl said, a little shyly.

Anne wanted to laugh, but forced down the merriment. “Then let us walk down this path, and Maxim can tell us both the story.”

She placed her arm into Maxim’s without even thinking about it, and seemingly just as unconsciously, Meredith slipped her hand in Maxim’s.

“Hundreds of years ago,” Maxim began as they started to walk together, “there was a fabulous queen in Russia. She laughed at the sun, and ordered her subjects to look for the diamonds hidden in the snow. She was determined to have them for herself, and no one else.”

“And did she find them?” Meredith’s eyes were wide, and Anne smiled. Seeing her and Maxim in this way, it made tomorrow all the sweeter.

“She did, and she made a glorious necklace of the very finest, on a gold chain,” said Maxim impressively, winking surreptitiously at

Anne. "She believed she could live forever when she put that necklace on, because something and someone so beautiful could surely never die. And that is why, two hundred years later, when I met her, she was still wearing the necklace."

"You met her!" Meredith laughed with surprise. "No, you could not have!"

"Are you calling me a liar?" Maxim said in mock outrage. "When I met this queen I could see that she was exceptionally beautiful, but she was also cold, and there was no joy or warmth in her heart. I knew she did not deserve the necklace, and one day, I would meet a woman even more beautiful, and this time with a beautiful heart. So I stole the necklace."

"Maxim!"

"You really stole it?" Meredith sounded impressed. "But did the queen not have guards, and...and soldiers?"

"Hundreds of them," said Maxim solemnly. Anne risked a glance at Meredith, who was utterly enraptured. "But I was pure of heart, and all they wanted were the diamonds. I escaped, and I have been holding onto that diamond necklace ever since, waiting for the beautiful woman who deserved it."

Meredith glanced up at Anne, and said softly, "And now you've found her."

Anne blushed as Maxim said, "Precisely. The moment I saw your sister, I could see her beauty, but as I have become more acquainted with her, I have seen and felt the real beauty of her heart. We are to be wed tomorrow, and I knew it was time to give her the necklace."

Meredith stared at the two of them for a moment, evidently astonished at the story. "Is that true?"

Anne squeezed Maxim's arm. "Of course it is. Why would Maxim make up such a story?"

"Meredith!" The call came from Sir Thomas, who had stepped out of a doorway and was waving at the trio. "Come on now, we must be going!"

"Coming!" Meredith let go of Maxim's hand, but hesitated before running off. "Was there a second necklace that you stole from the queen?"

"Meredith!"

But Maxim laughed. "No, my child. I did take a bracelet from her jewellery box, and a wise hermit told me the true legend of it – but that is a story for another day. Go to your father."

Anne smiled as the girl scampered away. "You should not tell her such stories, Maxim."

"Why not?" He smiled, squeezed her hand. "She is a delightful child, and I like to tell wild stories. You never know, I might have been telling the truth."

Anne laughed. "A Russian queen that lived for hundreds of years? Diamonds in the snow? You, getting past hundreds of soldiers?"

"You do not believe I could do it?" Maxim protested with a smile. "Do not worry, I already have the bracelet wrapped. It was intended to be a Christmas Day present, and now it will be all the more delightful for her, I hope. You are fortunate indeed to have Meredith as a sister."

Anne's blood went cold, but Maxim did not appear to need a response. She bit her lip. Was now the time to tell him the truth? But it would hardly help him, and it would certainly not help her.

All the truth would do is confuse him.

"Alexei Dmitry Immanuil Maximilian Konstantinovich?"

They turned around to see a footman standing in the freezing cold, shivering.

"Yes?" Maxim said, clicking his heels and bowing. "That is I."

The footman handed over a piece of paper without saying another word. Maxim read it, his dark eyes widening as he finished it, and then without saying a word he handed it over to Anne.

She read it carefully.

Alexei Dmitry Immanuil Maximilian Konstantinovich,

You have waited around for long enough, damn you. Come and find me in my rooms, and let us discuss this Czardom you claim.

His Royal Highness, the Prince Regent

When Anne looked up, Maxim was smiling broadly.

"This is the moment," he said softly, as the footman looked away respectfully. "This is it, Annika. Today is the day that I am confirmed as Czar! And tomorrow, you will marry him."

Excitement welled up in Anne's heart, but not because of his latter words. "You really think he will confirm you?"

Her voice had been a whisper, but Maxim had caught every word. "Why else would he want to see me?"

His whole demeanour had changed; the relaxed nature from his story to Meredith had gone and his body was taut with excitement.

And then he deflated. "I had hoped to spend the rest of the

morning with you. You do not mind, Annika, if I leave you now?"

"I would not dare attempt to stop you," she said with a smile. "Please go, and take all my luck with you."

Maxim grinned, and impulsively kissed her on the lips, even as they stood there in the grounds of St. James' Court. And then he was gone.

Anne put her hand to her lips. There was still heat there, so strong it was as though she had been branded by his love, as though no one else would ever be able to make her feel this way, now that they have shared what they have shared.

And was that not true? After all they had experienced, after all they had been to each other, there was nothing she wanted more than to spend her life with him.

She loved him. She may not have spoken the words aloud, but he understood, surely – and he cared, perhaps even loved her.

Anne shivered. With no other companions, the open wintery air did nothing but chill her. It took only ten minutes to reach her rooms, throwing off her coat and sinking into a chair gratefully by the fire. The whole day was ahead of her, and she had naught to fill it with but a good book.

One of her favourite novels had been beside the chair, but it had gone. Anne smiled. It looked like Meredith had a similar taste.

She sighed, stretching out her legs and enjoying the comfort of the chair. When she had been a child, near Meredith's age now, she had thought being at Court would be balls and excitement every waking moment.

Now she was older, she knew the truth: most of it was waiting around for Prinny to decide what he wanted to do!

Without her book, Anne picked up her father's discarded paper. At least it could entertain her for an hour or two. Her fingers flicked through the pages, not looking for anything in particular, but her attention was caught by a name that was familiar.

Alexei Dmitry Immanuel Maximilian Konstantinovich.

Anne folded the newspaper and read the sentence, but it did not seem to make sense. The paragraph did not make sense either, and after struggling to understand what it meant, she sighed and moved her gaze to the top of the article.

Our editor has received reports once again that a certain gentleman, who goes by the name of Alexei Dmitry Immanuel Maximilian Konstantinovich, has been spotted at another pawnbrokers – in this case,

purchasing a number of foreign looking medals. Despite having no claim to them and likely no understanding of the great mockery he has put himself to by attempting to appear far more noble than he actually is, the gentleman in question has been spotted at St. James' Court, no less, wearing the very medals purchased merely days before! This editor hopes that Alexei Dmitry Immanuel Maximilian Konstantinovich has a few friends to whisper in his ear, and tell him of the dreadful ridicule he is experiencing across Society.

Anne swallowed, and read the paragraph again, but its meaning did not change.

Maxim bought those medals. He bought them from a pawnbroker. They were not even his medals.

Trying to ignore the frantic beating of her heart, she carefully folded the newspaper and put it down. Then she allowed the thoughts creeping at the back of her mind to come forward.

Was this editor perhaps jealous? Who would not want to be a prince, or king, or Czar?

Anne swallowed, her gaze falling to the blazing fire. An editor would not be permitted to print blatant lies in his newspaper, there would be an outcry. And when she really thought about it, how much did she know about Maxim?

Only what he told her.

Anne gripped the arms of the chair as she fought down the panic rising from her stomach. His name, his history, even his family – all of it could be lies. His name did sound a little ridiculous, now she thought about it without his intoxicating presence before her.

She had accused him, once, of being a confidence trickster. And what had he replied?

“What answer do you want? What do you want to be true?”

Maxim had said from the very beginning of their acquaintance that he had a secret. There was no proof to say that he was who he said he was. No servants, no friends, no supporters. Just her.

In a moment of irritation, Anne unfolded the paper and read the paragraph again.

This editor hopes that Alexei Dmitry Immanuel Maximilian Konstantinovich has a few friends to whisper in his ear, and tell him of the dreadful ridicule he is experiencing across Society.

How had this editor, whoever he was, known about this? Perhaps he had spoken to the pawnbroker. Why would a pawnbroker lie?

Her breathing slightly ragged, she put the newspaper down again. The newspaper would not lie, and so that could only mean... that Maxim had lied.

"Earned through battle, though I will not say who with for this is an English court with English sensibilities. Just pieces of metal, really."

She had given her heart, her body, her soul to a gentleman who was a liar. Was he also a thief? Was he even Russian? He could be a bootmaker from Moscow, and she would have no idea.

Anne rose without conscious thought, desperate in her need to do something, understand it all. What better person to ask than Maxim himself?

She would have to face him at some point.

She had almost reached the door of her rooms when she hesitated. Maxim had been called to the presence of the Prince Regent, but that did not necessarily mean that Prinny had been ready to see him. Maxim could still have been waiting.

Anne bit her lip. Perhaps she would find something, something to confirm his identity...in his rooms.

Five minutes later, she was knocking gently on his bed chamber door. So certain had she been that he would still be with Prinny that she jumped when a voice inside spoke.

"Come in."

Anne took a deep breath. This was the moment it could all fall apart.

Maxim looked surprised to see her when she opened the door. "Annika! I did not think I would see you again so soon. I am told that it is bad luck to see your bride the day before the wedding."

Anne tried to keep her voice calm. "Maxim, I...I need to ask you something."

"I know what you are going to ask, and I am sad to say, not yet," Maxim said heavily.

She shut the door behind her with a puzzled expression. "Not... not yet?"

He shook his head, throwing himself into a chair. "No, Prinny is not willing to make a decision quite yet. I think I almost have him convinced, but it will take a little more time. He wants to hear about my adventure, how I managed to get here."

Anne stepped into the room and found her voice was cold as she said, "I would like to hear that story, too."

Maxim had opened his mouth to respond, but he hesitated.

Evidently, something in her voice made him pause. "And I was always going to, Annika. I just have not found the time, yet."

"And are you also going to tell me," Anne said, not moving towards him because she knew her heart would melt and fall at his feet if she got any closer, "the story about why you decided to choose a false title for yourself?"

Maxim's face fell, and then his brow furrowed. "False title?"

"Those medals you showed me," said Anne, hating every word but knowing she had to speak. How could she marry a man tomorrow with all these lies between them? "They are not yours – I mean, they are yours now, but you did not inherit them, or earn them. You bought them, Maxim. You bought them."

She had thought her words of accusation would provoke far more of a response, but he did not move. His brow remained furrowed, but he did not take his eyes from her.

When he finally spoke, it was in a low, hurt voice. "And where did you hear all this nonsense, Annika?"

"'Tis not nonsense!" Anne could not help but raise her voice a little. "Maxim, or whatever your real name is – it is all in the paper! The newspaper tells the whole world that you bought those medals! You are a laughingstock and...and so would I have been, if I married you."

"If?"

Anne swallowed. Only an hour ago, she had realised that this was the gentleman she wanted to spend the rest of her life with, but now she knew the truth about him. Perhaps it was time he learned the truth about her.

"No more secrets," she said softly. "No more lies. If you still think that marriage tomorrow is a good idea, for both of us, then... then perhaps we can put this all behind us."

"I do not have any secrets," Maxim growled. "Not ones that matter."

"But I do." Anne could barely believe she had spoken the words, but this was not the time to hide the truth. Perhaps, if she had just told him at the very beginning, they would never have continued this engagement of convenience, and she would never have given herself to him, fallen in love with him, only to have her heart broken again.

Maxim scoffed, throwing his hands up in the air. "I do not think any 'secret' you tell me will be as shocking as the accusation you've

just thrown at me!”

Anne swallowed. She still had the opportunity to disappear from this room, keep the truth to herself. But some part of her wanted to hurt him, hurt him as his lies had hurt her.

“Do you want to bet?” she said softly.

Maxim rolled his eyes. “Go on, then. If you think you can try to shock me, you are perfectly mista – ”

“Meredith is my daughter.”

Anne had not expected the words to be so difficult to say, but there was a ringing silence in the room after them.

Maxim rose to his feet. “Y-Your...”

She nodded. Well, she had come this far. “I was...seduced, I suppose you could say, when young. A soldier, passing through our town. My father has raised her as his own, and borne my disgrace with silence. Maxim, I was no innocent when you met me.”

10

Maxim's jaw fell open.

Had he heard those words correctly?

"Meredith is my daughter."

Mind utterly overwhelmed, thoughts rushing around his brain, it was not possible to untangle them into rational understanding: but he could feel.

Dread, confusion, anger: they swept through his body like a cold winter wind. As Annika stood there, staring at him as though waiting for a response, he could do nothing but stare.

Everything that he knew – or thought he had known, more accurately – about this sweet, gentle, charming woman...

His eyes raked over her, looking for a sign that she was lying. But no; everything before this moment had been the lie.

"Daughter." That was the only word he could manage, and it appeared that Annika was just as overwhelmed as he was. Without speaking, she nodded.

She was a mother! That caring, nurturing nature, of course it had to come from somewhere. Annika was a mother. Meredith was her child!

He could never have guessed, but now that he knew, there was a certainty in him that he should have guessed. They were so alike. Neither of them had mentioned their mother, and...had Annika ever described Meredith as her daughter?

The realisation that he was not about to wake up from a nightmare came over him, and Maxim felt nausea rise in his stomach. Nothing but deep shock could feel like this. How was it possible to keep this from him, after all they had shared – after the passion they had experienced in the bed just feet from him?

True, he had his own secrets, but he had always said he had a hidden past. Nothing he could tell her would be as dramatic as this.

Annika's eyes had not left his, and he watched her hands come together and clench nervously. She feared him, or at least, feared his reaction. And she was right to be. Only now did their conversation about Miss Emma Tilbury, the mistress of the Earl of

Marnmouth, come into focus.

Of course, she had argued in her favour. Was there very much difference between them, really?

His gaze was caught by the bed in the corner of the room, and Maxim swallowed down the sadness that suddenly rose. He had not been her first. The pleasure he had given her had, perhaps, not even compared to what she had experienced with this, this, *soldier*.

“Wh-Why did you not tell me sooner?”

His splutter was genuine, but Annika narrowed her eyes as though he had attempted to accuse her of espionage.

“I did not have to tell anyone,” she said defensively. “And after all, ‘tis not purely my secret. It belongs – belonged to Meredith too. I have no wish for my child to be judged wherever she went, haunted by the mistakes of her mother.”

Maxim shut his eyes, as though not being able to see Annika would help him to understand her better. Child, mother, they were simply not words he could ever have imagined coming from her lips.

And then something struck him and his eyes snapped open. “She does not know?”

“Of course not,” Annika snapped, some of that fire returning to her voice. “What sort of monster do you take me for? I would not put that on a child, not an innocent who has known nothing but kindness and acceptance. I have allowed her to live an...an ordinary life. She has a much older sister. That is all she knows.”

“Much older sister?” Maxim blurted out, hardly able to take the mocking laughter from his tones. “Annika, you are...you are an unmarried mother! God knows where her father is, and you think that I, a Czar, could marry a ruined woman?”

Annika’s cheeks darkened, but her voice was forceful as she said, “I am not a ruined woman!”

Maxim laughed drily and threw up his hands, almost falling into the chair behind him. If she was going to be so unreasonable...

“I made a mistake!” Annika stepped forward, but stopped after a few steps, evidently unsure of herself. “A mistake that I am sure countless other women have made – and the mistake was thinking that he loved me. I do not regret Meredith, I could never regret her!”

A curl of regret tied itself around Maxim’s heart. “I did not say that – ”

"No one knows the truth, none save the two of us and my father," she continued, her voice a little more forceful. "I have lived a...a normal life ever since. There is no reason why that could not continue."

Maxim laughed bitterly, shaking his head. "Secrets always come out, eventually."

She joined his laughter, and it sounded awful coming from her sweet lips. "You would know all about that, would you not, Maxim? If that is your real name, which I am not minded to believe at this moment. After all, it was only today that your secret was published in the newspaper!"

It took him a few seconds to realise what she was referring to. "Oh, you mean this tittle tattle about the medals?"

"To think the whole of society is laughing at you," Annika said with a physical shudder.

Fury rose in Maxim's heart. To be judged by such a woman, with such a mistake haunting her past! It was not to be borne.

But as he looked up at Annika about to spit angry words, his heart softened. Even knowing what he did now, he could not despise her. She was Annika. Something about her clung on in his heart, his very soul cried out for her. He needed her, despite it all.

"You are mistaken if you think those medals are my secret," he said aloud. "Those blasted medals are nothing to do with it."

Annika's face crinkled into a curious frown. "Then...then I think it is time that you told me about this secret of yours. There is no purpose in holding anything else back, after all!"

It was impossible for Maxim to think; not with all this hurt and anger rushing through his mind. What harm could it do? They were not going to marry now, that much was clear, and no one would believe her anyway.

"My secret is the best one – the truth!" He blurted out. The words seemed to arrange themselves without conscious thought, pouring from him after being dammed up for so long. "You think I do not hear everyone laughing at me, calling me pretender?"

Annika nodded, unable to speak.

Maxim laughed drily. "Yes, and I act like the perfect pretender, do I not? Eager to please, eager to see the Prince, speaking with as many earls and dukes as I can? Well, that is the only way to keep myself safe. I need Prinny to *deny me my Czardom*."

Annika was staring as though he had lost his wits. "But...but

that does not make any sense.”

“And that is why the plan was so brilliant,” Maxim said bitterly. “If there was any justice I would be confirmed as the Czar, but I would not last long. My brother was murdered, assassinated for even suggesting that our family line was the one that should have been on the throne. My sister, taken from us. I have no idea what happened to her, though I pray she is safe.”

Now the words were pouring from his lips, it seemed impossible to stop. When was the last time he had spoken of Katarina? Months. Almost a year. And now he had merely alluded to her, he could feel the tears pinching in the corners of his eyes.

Brushing away the burning liquid, he continued, “The more ridiculous I look, the more kings and queens of Europe refuse to confirm my birth right, the more likely it is that I shall be left alone. And yet I am the future Czar, or at least I should be. There. My precious secret.”

Annika took a hesitant step towards him. “So...so your secret is that you never lied about who you were.”

“I am Alexei Dmitry Immanuil Maximilian Konstantinovich, Czar of Russia,” Maxim said heavily. “But to be publicly confirmed as such...it would be a death sentence. I have to keep myself safe, far better than I was able to keep Igor and Katarina safe.”

Why did it feel so strange, sharing this truth with her? He had carried the secret for so long that it had become a weight around his neck, and now that he had shared it, he had thought he would feel lighter.

But the tension and bitterness between them had not disappeared.

“What about the medals?”

Maxim sighed. “Damn it, Annika, you think I wanted to pawn them? But I was in desperate need of funds, and I had nothing else of value on me.” His hands twisted in his lap. “I should have known it was a mistake from the moment I walked into that place, but... but I was hungry. I needed coin, and for that I pawned my family’s honour along with our medals. I came into some more funds. I bought the medals back.”

When he finally had the courage to look up, it was to see a softening on Annika’s face.

“You...you should have just told me in the first place,” she stammered. “All these jewels you have given me...why –”

Maxim laughed bitterly. "What, and you would have believed me? When we first met, you wanted to be entertained. You did not want to hear the sad story of a royal house come to ruin. In my family, a gentleman does what he must to survive, and takes the sacrifices upon himself. Pawning my medals hurt me. Pawning family jewels would have hurt my future bride."

"Still," she said, a little more firmly. "You should have told me, after we..."

Her eyes flitted to the bed.

Irritation rose in Maxim's heart. "And you should have told me about Meredith! Do you not think that a husband deserves to know if his wife has any children?"

"You would not have understood!" A little of Annika's fire had returned to her voice. "No one would have, and I saw how you looked at Miss Emma Tilbury – and she had no child!"

He waved away her protestations, feeling nothing but bitterness. "I was nothing but honest with you, and this is how you repay me?"

"How was I to know that I would fall in love with you, actually desire this marriage?"

Annika put her hands over her mouth, obviously shocked at the words which had come from her mouth.

Maxim stood up slowly. His heart was pounding, his lungs jerking, trying to take in enough air, but there was not enough in the room.

She was in love with him. *She loved him.*

"How was I to know that I would fall in love with you?"

The words rose up in his throat that he returned her affections: that he loved her, had loved her from the moment that she had crept into his bed chamber and asked for his touch.

But he forced them down. He could not even countenance the idea of marrying a woman who had been...well, despoiled would have been the word he would have used for anyone else. Just thinking it about Annika felt wrong, but he could not help it.

She had loved another man, conceived and borne his child.

He had to be strong. His noble house could not be aligned with one such as her.

"This has to end." The words came out almost as a croak, and even as he spoke he had to force his hands to stay by his side and not reach out for her. Just the touch of her hand would be enough to overwhelm his resolve, and he owed it to himself, and to his

house, to stay strong. "This must end now."

"End?" Annika was looking in confusion. "I do not understand. We know each other better now, all secrets are out in the open. Tomorrow, Christmas Day, we...we could..."

Her voice trailed away at just the look of his face.

"I cannot go through with the wedding."

Her eyes widened. "You...you cannot?"

Maxim could not help but laugh now, and its bitterness was bile in his throat. "You really believed, after hurling accusations at me and revealing your own...history – you thought we could just ignore today and get married tomorrow?"

"If we both care for each other," she said in an insistent tone, "then every obstacle can be surmounted!"

Maxim ignored the words. He would not admit the love in his heart, not now that she had broken it. "I was foolish to even consider a wife who wasn't royal, let alone innocent."

It happened in a moment. Annika stepped forward and gave him such a slap across the face that he staggered back, falling into his chair.

"You are hardly innocent," she said, fury dripping from her voice as she stood over him. "Two standards for royalty and commoners, for gentlemen and ladies...I should never have trusted you. Good day, Alexei Dmitry Immanuel Maximilian Konstantinovich."

She stormed out of the room without saying another word. Maxim raised his hand to touch his cheek, which was burning. The heat was nothing to the pain in his heart.

Someone was pulling painfully at Anne's arm. No matter how much she attempted to retreat into her own bed, eyes still firmly shut, they did not seem to go away.

"Anne?"

Anne frowned, eyes unopened. The last thing she wanted to do was wake up. Her headache, brought on by too many tears the evening before, still lingered across her temples. Why would she want to face the world? Why was someone trying to force her into consciousness when all she wanted to do was stay here?

"Anne!"

It was her father. His voice sounded concerned, but Anne brushed him away, pulling her arm under her bed linens. She did not want to speak with him. She did not want to speak with anyone.

"I have to leave. See if you can wake her."

Heavy footsteps sounded, followed by the opening and shutting of a door. Anne sighed. Perhaps now she would be left in peace.

"Anne?"

Her eyes snapped open. "Meredith?"

Something inside her, call it nature, a primal instinct, forced her to fully awake as her child said her name. Meredith was standing beside the bed, a concerned look across her face.

"What is wrong?" Anne forced herself to sit up, her head aching and heavy. "Are you hurt, are you injured?"

Meredith shook her head. She was wearing her favourite gown and her hair had been pinned up. The childishness of her features had completely gone with the adult coiffure.

"Nothing is wrong, Anne," Meredith whispered. She seemed to know that Anne's head hurt, keeping her voice low. "It is almost luncheon, and you did not rise for breakfast. Are you feeling unwell?"

Anne's gaze shifted from her daughter to the clock over the mantelpiece. It was indeed almost one o'clock in the afternoon. Sunlight streamed around the drawn curtains, weak winter sun with

no heat in it.

“Luncheon?”

Meredith nodded. Anne attempted to collect her thoughts, but they were so painful and so scattered that it seemed impossible to keep track of them all.

Had she made a mistake by going to Maxim’s bed chamber last night? But she could never have proceeded with the marriage – the sham marriage, she thought bitterly – without knowing the truth about those medals.

If only she had never read that newspaper. Had she made a huge mistake, thrown away the only chance she may have for happiness?

But had she not already started to suspect that there was something more going on that he was not telling her? How could she trust a gentleman who had not told her the truth...or at least the whole truth, about his past?

She would never have had a prickle of doubt, never confronted him, and never told him the truth about Meredith.

She looked at her daughter. She had not been truthful with Maxim, that was true, but how could she? Who would understand?

And of course, she had been proven right in the end. Maxim had not understood, and now there would be no wedding.

“Anne?”

Anne forced herself to focus. Meredith needed her, an anxious frown across her face.

“Please do not concern yourself,” she said quietly, taking Meredith’s hand and squeezing it. “I am quite well but I...I did not sleep well last night. I chose to stay in bed which was rather lazy of me, I admit. Nothing is wrong. I may just spend the day in bed, to recover.”

She had intended her words to calm that puckered frown, but if anything, they had the opposite effect.

“But you are supposed to be getting married this afternoon,” Meredith said in a rush. “Where is Maxim? No one has seen him, and you are sick.”

No matter how hard she tried, Anne could not prevent her heart from sinking. He had warned her, right in that conversation when they had organised this sham of an engagement. Had he not said that he would disappear?

“Miss Marsh can inform me on Christmas Eve whether she wishes to go ahead with the marriage. If not, I will disappear to France the next

morning – I am due to see some friends there in any event – and Miss Marsh will be a jilted, sorrowful figure. One to claim society's pity, not scandal."

It was hardly a surprise, but Anne could not have predicted the heaviness of her disappointment. It consumed her, like a fire, taking all joy and hope from her soul.

She swallowed. The last thing she needed was for Meredith to see just how upset she was – but she was not a child anymore, not really. She deserved the truth.

Some of it.

"I am sorry to say that the wedding will not be happening this afternoon," she said gently. "I...I discussed it with Maxim last night, and we decided that it was not the best thing for us."

Meredith's frown disappeared, but it was replaced by sorrow. "It is because of me, isn't it?"

Anne's heart froze as she tried to say calmly, "Of course not, Merry. Why would you think that?"

Her cheeks pinked as she said, "Well, because...because I am your daughter, and he did not approve, did he?"

If the entire bed had fallen over a cliff, Anne would not have felt any more astonished, fearful, and shocked. Her stomach dropped away as she looked at a child who would spend the rest of her life fighting against the prejudice of others.

How was it possible? They had been so careful, so secret. Neither she nor her father had ever shared the secret with anyone. They had even travelled to France to have the baby, when her mother had been alive. Only a month later had they lost her, tragedy amongst new life.

No one had known. So how had Meredith discovered the truth?

"Wh-what?" were the only words she could manage to speak aloud, as wild thoughts whirled around her mind.

Was Meredith even old enough to understand the consequences of this for her – for both of them?

"What are you talking about?" Anne managed to say with a little more decorum.

Meredith smiled, and in that moment, she became the very image of Anne herself, at that age. Anne felt she was looking at a portrait taken of her at the age of thirteen.

"I heard someone speaking of it a few years ago," her daughter was saying hesitantly, her cheeks pinking. "It did not take too much

thinking to understand it fully. Please do not worry. I like having you as both sister and mother.”

Anne smiled weakly. And here she had been attempting to protect Meredith from what she already knew.

“I understand that it must remain a secret,” she was saying, “that I had to remain a secret. But...did Maxim find out? Is that why he has left us?”

Anne swallowed. If Meredith’s true parentage were ever public knowledge, she would experience far worse than Maxim’s confused anger.

But she was too old to be lied to.

Anne sighed. She certainly would not have chosen these circumstances to try and explain this all to Meredith, and if she were not careful, the tears she had not cried for the last thirteen years would all fall at the same time.

“Maxim does not wish to marry me anymore, and that does not mean he did not enjoy your company greater. It is not because of who you are, it is because of...something I said to him.”

Meredith bit her lip, and only in that moment did Anne realise that her daughter looked just like her when conflicted.

“I...I am not ashamed of who I am,” she said simply.

Anne reached forward and pulled her daughter close. “Good. Because you should not be. You are wonderful.”

Meredith’s voice came a little muffled, and jagged with emotion. “I love you, Mummy.”

How was it possible for Anne’s heart to break all over again? This precious child, this unique cargo she had carried through life and now had to watch venture further and further from her safe and loving arms...how would they ever be the same again?

How long they were in each other’s arms, she did not know. In a way, it was their first ever hug as mother and daughter, both of them fully aware of the truth, and Anne had to brush away a tear. Her daughter, and she was not a child anymore.

When Anne finally released her, Meredith’s eyes were a little pink. “I am glad you were able to explain it to Maxim. I would...I would hate for him to have the wrong idea, and for the two of you to fall out because of me.”

Anne bit her lip and tried to smile. It had all happened so fast, that conversation yesterday afternoon. Had she explained everything properly? Had she really listened to him when he had

attempted to explain things?

"I know I cannot call you Mummy in society," the younger girl said wistfully. "I shall have to remember to call you 'Anne'."

Anne smiled. "I will answer to either, you know that. I will always answer when you call."

How could she ever have thought Meredith too young for St. James' Court? Why, she was practically a young lady, and yet the child she remembered – giggling through the fields behind their home, learning how to play with the cat without getting scratched, the tantrums at the piano – that child was still there, too. In the eyes, perhaps.

"I am going to go open another present," said Meredith, her voice cutting through Anne's thoughts, "and I'll let you wake up slowly. Join us if you feel able."

She stepped away but paused by the door, looking back at her mother. "If Maxim did not hear the full story, perhaps he misunderstood. Perhaps you should talk to him."

And with that, she was gone.

Anne fell back into the comfort of her pillows and felt her soul unsettled. Her heart still hurt, and if that was not love, she did not know what was. But was it too late to speak with Maxim? What would she say? She would not apologise for who Meredith was, or what she herself had done in the past.

Was it possible to make peace with a Czar at Christmas?



* * *

Maxim sank heavily into the chair, rubbing his sore eyes. His arrival into the room was met with laughter.

"My goodness," Prince Édouard said, sitting lightly opposite him at the breakfast table. "I would say you were a sight for sore eyes, but I think it is you who has the sore eyes, not me!"

Maxim attempted to smile, but did not manage it.

“When you turned up outside my door at God knows what o’clock on Christmas morning, I was expecting a dramatic story!” Édouard’s smile faded. “And yet now I am minded to think it more a tragedy than a comedy.”

Maxim sighed. He knew his friend of old, and he would not be put off. “‘Tis a dramatic tale, you must admit. I went through it all last night, surely you do not need me to tell it again?”

Édouard shook his head as he reached for the teapot. “No, I think I have a clear idea of what happened.”

Why did his friend sound so calm? Maxim glared down at his plate. What was the point of food, if he had to live in a world in which Annika lived, but could not be his?

“Who would have believed it,” he said darkly, poking at a sausage. “A woman who looked so innocent could actually be so – ”

“Human?” Édouard said archly.

Maxim scowled at his friend. “If you do not want me here, cluttering up your home, I can just leave.”

The prince leaned back in his chair, examining his expression. “Do not be so *insensé*. I would never turn away a friend, especially a distant cousin.”

That was enough to make Maxim smile, just a little. “You have never told me how we are supposed to be related. What was it, third cousin twice removed by our great grandparent’s marriage?”

Édouard waved away Maxim’s words as he grinned. “The point is that we are both royal – and you, if you do not mind me saying so, have managed to create a royal mess for yourself.”

Maxim leaned forward with teacup in his hand, which was filled. “I do not know how you make that out. I was honest with her the entire time, from the very beginning of this sham engagement – ”

“Which was your suggestion,” interrupted Édouard.

“ – and yet all she did was lie to me,” continued Maxim doggedly.

His companion raised an eyebrow. “Oh, so it was common knowledge to everyone else then, I see.”

Discomfort rose in Maxim’s stomach. Well, anything would sound foolish if spoken like that. “No, it was a secret from everyone – I don’t think the child even knows.”

After taking a sip of his tea, Édouard frowned. “I am lost then, my

friend. What made you think that you were special, nay, important enough to be told a secret that a father and daughter had kept for over a decade?"

"We were supposed to be getting married this afternoon!" Maxim exploded. "'Tis only because of our late night conversation that we are having breakfast at this ungodly hour. I should be on my way to be married at this very moment!"

The cup of tea in his hand had spilled across the table. A brown stain moved steadily across the crisp white linen.

He was supposed to be getting married that afternoon. How had it all changed in just one conversation? Instead of finding his bed warmed by his delicious new bride, he was spending Christmas as the miserable guest of Édouard.

His host was shaking his head. "You fool."

Without saying another word, he rose and stepped over to a cabinet. As Maxim watched, Édouard opened up the cabinet, took out a bottle of an amber liquid, and two glasses.

"You know, I would not normally do this at only one o'clock in the afternoon," he said conversationally, "but it is lunchtime, I suppose, and it is Christmas. More importantly, you are an *imbécile*."

Pouring a large measure of the liquid, he handed the glass to Maxim.

"Brandy?"

Édouard nodded. "France's best."

Maxim accepted it gratefully and poured the burning liquid down his throat. It brought him back to life in a way that tea never could.

"I admit it," he said grudgingly, "it was a secret from the world, true, and so I was not particularly special in not knowing it. But damnit, Édouard, I wanted to be special! I was going to marry her!"

Édouard had poured himself a similarly generous glass of brandy, and as he sat back in his chair opposite him, raised an eyebrow. "I thought the only reason you had concocted this charade was because you two were found in a compromising position. Was it not a...*comment dites-vous, mensonge*...a lie, anyway?"

Maxim sighed, draining his brandy glass. Secrets and lies. Where do they mix, where do they meet? What was the difference in the end?

His mind returned to Annika. He had fought it, tried desperately

not to dwell on her beautiful face, the way she had hurtled away, hurt by him.

"Your Czar charm won't fool me."

A smile crept across his face, unbidden. She was honest, their conversation free, every moment with her easy.

Their lovemaking had been wild and passionate, unrestrained. He had never experienced anything like her.

Was he really willing to walk away from all of that?

"You are a Czar," Édouard said heavily, "or you should be, which is what matters. But right now here you are, in exile with a fellow exiled royal, in another country where you cannot be appreciated."

Maxim's heart softened. It was all very well for him to complain. He had a throne to go back to. His family, albeit distant, was still on the throne of Russia.

Édouard's would never be going back to France.

"Yet you had the chance for something real, something that you could actually experience whether you were a Czar or not," continued Édouard. "You had happiness in your grasp, and I say again, you were an idiot to lose it."

"I-I, the idiot!" Maxim spluttered, his veins heated by the brandy. "I am no fool!"

"Yes, you are," Édouard said calmly, placing his glass down and staring seriously at his friend. "After all this time you have spent looking for a throne, why not become the king of your own castle?"

Maxim stared. "Castle? The Marshes have no castle."

Shaking his head and laughing, Édouard said, "No, 'tis an English expression. To be king of your castle. To build a home. *Mon Dieu*, you had the chance to build a real life, not one in the clouds. Was it really worth throwing away for a little misunderstanding about medals?"

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Anne leaned back. "Well, I cannot eat another bite. Can you, Meredith?"

Meredith's eyes were a little glazed over, a sure fire sign that she had overeaten. "Pardon?"

Sir Thomas chuckled as he looked at his girls. "Well, I have to admit, I am impressed by the fare the kitchens here have been able to provide. You never know, when away from home, whether the quality will be precisely what you are expecting."

Anne placed a hand on her stomach. She had certainly eaten more than she had expected, but then, what was the point in attempting to remain slender? No gentleman would be calling on her any time soon, and with that disappeared any incentive.

Maxim had loved her body. No, Anne corrected herself silently, wincing at the very thought of him. Maxim had made love to her body. He had no real interest in her. As soon as he discovered the truth about her, the one secret she had, he had made it perfectly clear that he could not consider her as a bride.

"You really believed, after hurling accusations at me and revealing your own...history – you thought we could just ignore today and get married tomorrow?"

"Right then," said her father, cutting through into her thoughts. "If we go now, we should be in time to see the royal family arrive."

Anne sighed heavily. "May I stay here, in our rooms, Father? I am not feeling up to company today."

Sir Thomas frowned. "We have to go, Annika. My goodness, 'tis Christmas!"

Anne winced. That little pet name, once so beloved by her when only her father had used it, was spoiled now. Maxim had ruined it for her.

Meredith looked between them and then said loyally, "I do not wish to go either, Papa."

Anne smiled, despite herself. Perhaps now that the truth was out in the open between them, they would become even closer. Perhaps there was joy to be found in this situation, even if her heart was

breaking.

“Of course you do,” she said gently. “Do you not want to see the decorations, the candles, and the royal family?”

Her daughter squirmed in her seat. “There...there is a boy that I was hoping to see there.”

Anne looked over her head and mouthed ‘boy’ to her father. Sir Thomas shrugged and shook his head with a sigh.

“Well, if you wish to meet your gentleman friend, we will need to go,” he said aloud. “Come now, Meredith. Go and choose a piece of jewellery from your sister’s things, you deserve a treat this Christmas. And change into your court clothes, while you are there.”

Cheeks a little pink at the admission of a gentleman friend, Meredith obediently rose and stepping into her own room.

Anne leaned back and shook her head. “A gentleman friend. She is not even thirteen, Father.”

“It will be innocent enough,” he said bracingly. “Come now. You will need to change, too, and while you are changing gowns may I suggest a change in expression?”

“This was supposed to be my wedding day, Father,” Anne said fiercely, not bothering to keep her voice down. “I do not think it will be as simple as just deciding to be cheerful.”

Sir Thomas had risen and was pulling off his waistcoat to swap it for a more formal one. “Nonsense. You will enjoy it once we see the royal family. You do not know, maybe you could meet another gentleman and – ”

“No.”

Her word was so final that Sir Thomas turned to stare at her. “Anne?”

She smiled sadly. “Father, no more. I...my heart cannot take it anymore. Let us survive through today, maybe a few more days, and then let us go home.”

“But – ”

“I am going to get dressed,” she said calmly, rising to her feet as Meredith came back into the room. “My daughter needs her mother.”

Sir Thomas’ eyes expanded dangerously, and Anne could not help but laugh. Perhaps this was going to bring about a new change in her family? Perhaps they could all be more honest with each other, now all this misery had occurred.

"She knows, Father. She knows," Anne said gently, touching his arm lightly as she passed. "Do not ask me how, but she does, and I think it is for the best. I will be back within twenty minutes."

It seemed that only after a few minutes, the three of them were entering into the centre of the court. Despite her father's words, Anne could already see that it would be a dull affair. Few people of any elegance were there, and there was no energy in the room, no vibrancy. The royal family, it appeared, were not going to attend.

Anne found herself breathing out slowly. So, Maxim would not be here. There was no chance of it if the Prince Regent was not going to be here.

The thought should have brought her joy, but instead it merely made her feel even more despondent. At this very moment, she should have been returning from the church, a married woman, to receive the blessing of the Regent. Instead...

"Now, Meredith," Sir Thomas was saying very seriously, glaring at his granddaughter who was smiling and waving at a boy of about her age across the other side of the room. "Are you going to introduce us to your friend?"

Anne knew she must step in. "Meredith, you are not to leave this room, you understand?"

Meredith raised her eyes to her mother's, and likely for the first time, received a mother's glare. "Yes, Anne."

Anne smiled. "Then enjoy yourself. We will be here if you tire of your friend and wish for our company."

Her daughter nodded, and then instead of scampering off as she would have done merely days ago, she elegantly walked across the room, curtsying as she arrived at the family group where her friend was standing.

Anne felt a heavy hand on her arm, and smiled at her father. "She is quite safe."

Sir Thomas sighed and shook his head. "That is what I thought about her mother."

Anne grasped his hand. "Whatever you did, you did for the best. I am just sorry that I was not able to live up to your expectations."

"Nonsense," her father said, waving aside her words. "I am more sorry that I have...well, pushed you towards Alex Dmitri Maximilian Konstantine, or whatever his name was."

Her stomach clenched, and her heart seemed to break all over again. She would have been his wife, and yet now she will never

see him again.

“It has made you so unhappy, and that is unforgiveable.”

“No,” she said firmly, “please do not apologise. I know you intended the best for me, and I understand why. It is not *your* fault that your plans did not come to pass. We could not have known that my secret would ruin everything.”

There was a moment of silence between them, and then her father removed his arm.

“You are...more upset, than I thought you would be,” he said delicately.

Anne smiled wanly, and nodded. “Well, I do not believe either of us predicted that I would actually fall in love with Maxim, did we? I should have known secrets would come between us. I should have known a Czar at Christmas wasn't someone you could depend on.”

Someone tapped on her shoulder. “So, you are the Czarina, are you?”



* * *

Maxim's heart was hardly beating, and he knew that because it was in his mouth. It had almost given out after he had forced Édouard's horse to gallop far faster than it was able, and he had almost fallen over dismounting and rushing into St. James' Court.

This was it. This was the moment he could win Annika back.

Did he deserve her? Probably not. Ever since she had stormed out of his bed chamber, he had gone over and over every word they had exchanged, and now in the cold light of day, could find little wrong with it.

He had behaved despicably, but he had to try. He would always wonder why.

He swallowed, and repeated, “So, you are the Czarina, are you?”

Annika was staring, and her father behind her was glaring in a

most unpleasant manner.

“What do you want, you cad?” Sir Thomas spoke quietly, evidently unwilling to create a crowd, but his words were venomous. “Please leave my daughter alone.”

Maxim’s eyes moved to Annika, who was blushing.

“I am no Czarina, sir,” she said calmly, her gaze not leaving him. “I believe one must marry a Czar for that.”

Was there warmth in those words, or just shock? Maxim could not tell, and he had little opportunity to discern her expression as she grabbed his arm and pulled him away from her father towards a corner of the room. Christmas decorations filled most of it, but she was able to force him away from everyone else before she hissed.

“What are you doing here?”

“Happy Christmas,” Maxim said weakly. What was the matter with him? He had had this all planned out, all agreed internally, and now he was standing before her, his legs were jelly and his mouth had no ability to speak coherently.

Annika rolled her eyes. “That is not helpful, Maxim. You know what I mean.”

He sighed, dropping his gaze, and finding it immediately resting on her delectable form. His eyes snapped back to her face. “I know what you meant. I am sorry, it is just...I have not done this much before?”

Curiosity shone in her face. “What, exactly?”

“Apologised,” he said blandly. Why was his voice shaking? “I...I needed you to know that I will always regret losing you all my life. Even more so than losing the Czardom.”

It was impossible to tell whether his words were having any impact. She was certainly still standing before him, and had not slapped him yet. Surely that was a good sign? Did she, perhaps, want him as much as he wanted her?

“I could not live with myself,” he said in a low voice, “not trying again. To see whether it would be possible for...for you to forgive me.”

Maxim held his breath. His entire future, his potential happiness, was resting on the response Annika now gave him.

It did not appear that he would be made happy. Annika’s forehead had puckered into a frown, and her arms had folded before her.

“I do not know why I should,” she said quietly, her voice steely.

"You were not completely honest with me, and I in turn was not entirely honest with you. Perhaps...perhaps it would be best for both of us if we do not see each other again. You are not in Kent often. It should not be too difficult."

Any hope Maxim had of reconciliation, perhaps even a stolen kiss, disappeared. Édouard had not warned him about this horrendous sinking feeling, when one realised that the love of your life was willing to go the rest of her days without laying eyes on you.

"I am not willing to give up," he found himself saying, all his pent up fears pouring from him. "We have experienced too much, shared too much, just to ignore how we feel about each other, Annika."

"Oh?" She raised an eyebrow. "And how do we feel about each other?"

Maxim swallowed and looked around the room. There was no one too close to them, no one who could overhear him. But this was a statement he had never made before, and when it came to speaking it aloud, his courage failed him.

"I was wrong, and I apologise," he said instead, hating himself for being such a coward. "I was...surprised, shall we say, by your admission. That surprise does not make my reaction acceptable – if anything, it makes it worse. I should have listened to you, heard the whole story."

Even his admission of guilt did not seem to be melting Annika's heart. Suspicions were in her eyes, and when she spoke, it was in an accusing manner.

"And where has this change of heart come from?"

Maxim did not answer immediately, but instead reached out and took her hand in his. It was warm, heating his whole body and bringing him back to life.

"A good friend attempted to knock some sense into me," he murmured, "but I realised I could consider myself an impressive Czar all I wanted, but that meant nothing if I did not have compassion for those I truly loved."

With his final word, Annika looked down at her hand which was being held in his. She did not speak, but she did not pull her hand away.

"I treated you with no compassion and that was wrong – as not just a czar, but a human being," Maxim said urgently. "You make

me feel alive, in a way I had not done since losing my family.”

“You made me feel the same,” she whispered, her eyes lifting to his. “But I can’t be hurt like that again.”

“It hurt because this means something, because it’s something valuable we must not lose,” he said fiercely. “Annika, everything in my life has changed now. My priorities were...I mean...everything I thought was important just pales in comparison when I look at you, and...”

Maxim’s voice trailed away. It was not possible to put into words what he had risked when he had pushed her away. Had he utterly lost it? Was there no way back?

Annika frowned. “We met but a week ago. How can you be sure that these – these feelings, are real?”

That, at least was a question he could answer. “I just know. I love you, Annika. I love you.”

His free hand moved to the pocket of his coat and pulled out the gift he had considered throwing in the Thames yesterday. Her eyes widened as she saw the small box move towards her.

“One last gift,” he whispered.

Almost seemingly against her will, Annika reached out for the box and opened it, gasping as the candlelight sparkled in the exquisite diamond ring.

“That was my great-grandmother’s ring,” Maxim breathed. “It was her daughter’s, and her daughters, and one day, I would like it to be your daughter’s. Our daughter’s, if you will permit me the greatest privilege of being part of Meredith’s life...and yours.”

Not taking his eyes from her, he lowered himself onto bended knee. There were murmurs around the room, and he could distinctly hear Lady Romeril’s voice near the back.

“Proposing? I thought they were engaged?”

“All secrets are out now,” he said quietly. “Let us make this a Christmas we never forget.”

He had expected – well, hoped – that Annika would smile, accept him, and perhaps even give him a kiss. At the very least, he had thought she would smile.

But she hesitated.

“What are you nervous about?”

Annika reached out and touched his hand, and whispered, “Any more secrets?”

No matter what her words said, he could feel the warmth in her

fingers, could see the way she leaned towards him.

A smile crept over his face. "Many, but none that really matter. The rest are just detail. You?"

Annika smiled and spoke so softly that only he could hear. "The father of Meredith is a Kaiser."

Maxim froze.

Her laugh seemed to resound around the room. "You will have to become accustomed to my sense of humour when we are married, you know."

She pulled him up to his feet, and then pulled his face towards hers. Maxim kissed her passionately, pouring all the frustrations of the last twenty four hours onto her lips. When they finally broke apart, there were astonished gasps around the room. Maxim glanced over at Sir Thomas, who was smiling broadly.

"Well, no time like the present," Maxim said lightly. "Father Michail?"

Father Michail stepped forward, rather out of breath. "I came as soon as I received your note, Czar, but – "

Annika was laughing as Maxim pushed the ring onto her finger. "You came prepared! How on earth could you possibly know that I would say yes?"

Maxim entwined his fingers in hers as Meredith came running over, her eyes shining. "Every Czar needs a Czarina by his side."

Epilogue

Anne sighed as she leaned back in the carriage. “Are we almost there?”

Every inch of her ached, and she could not remember the last time they had slept in an actual bed. Her back hurt more than ever, and her eyes itched with tiredness. It was not her habit to complain, but if they did not arrive soon...

The carriage jolted and she placed a hand over her swollen belly protectively. As though the little one knew precisely what she was thinking, it gave a little kick.

A smile crept over her face as she looked up. “I suppose a better question would be, are we going to get there before this baby arrives?”

Maxim laughed, his eyes twinkling. Seated opposite her in the carriage, he had encouraged her to place her weary feet up beside him, reducing the weight on them.

“Now then, what sort of a question is that to ask your husband?” he said mischievously. “Have I ever let you down?”

There was a snort from the gentleman beside him. Anne smiled at her father, who was frowning at his son-in-law in a most aggressive way.

Meredith, seated beside her mother, giggled. She was wrapped up in furs to keep the freezing weather from her bones, and she looked very snug.

Anne’s smile did not disappear as she said, “He has had a further eight months to do so, and so far Maxim has done very well. The question is, what about the next thirty years?”

Maxim leaned over and took his wife’s hands in his own. “And the rest.”

She could not help but beam. Alexei Dmitry Immanuil Maximilian Konstantinovich. He was everything she could have ever hoped for, more than she deserved. Doting on Meredith, respectful and caring towards her father, and devoted to her.

What had possessed her to push him away, just at the moment when she could have lost him forever?

Even more strangely, why had she thought she had not wished to marry?

But then, she had not even met Maxim when she had struck that bargain with her father. Her last season. Thank goodness, Maxim had chosen that time to attend St. James' Court. How different their lives would have been...

The carriage came to an abrupt stop, and Anne pulled her hands from Maxim's, holding her stomach protectively.

He had immediately peered out of the window, and he said with the joy of a child, "We are here, we are here!"

"Thank God," Anne muttered. The constant rocking of the carriage of the last – what was it three weeks? Four? They had all merged into one, and now at last she would be able to rest properly in the small family home Maxim had promised her.

True, it was in Russia, hundreds if not thousands of miles away from her beloved Romney marshes, but he had promised that this small house was in one of the warmest parts of Russia.

It did not feel like it when Maxim opened the door. A freezing wind rushed in, making Meredith and Sir Thomas pull their furs more tightly around them.

"What a journey," Sir Thomas said weakly. "It will be all be worth it, I am sure, once we get into this home of yours, Maxim..."

His voice trailed away as he descended from the carriage.

"Father?" Anne called out, but he did not reply. Instead, a hand appeared to help her down which she took grateful. "Father, what – oh, my!"

Her jaw dropped as she stood beside a grinning Maxim, holding his hand.

Before her was not a home. It was a palace, monstrous in size, elegant, and covered in snow. Four large towers pinned in the corners, and there was a gatehouse with a portcullis, and battlements...

"It is a castle," Sir Thomas breathed. Meredith was beside him, her eyes wide. "A castle, Maxim!"

"More like a palace, actually, Sir Thomas," Maxim said airily. "Do you like it, Annika."

Anne was not sure whether she would be able to find the words. "L-Like it? Maxim, you said it was a small house?"

"I said it was our smallest home," he corrected, still grinning. "This is the smallest of the palaces I have ever lived in. What was I

supposed to say?"

Anne stood and stared. Everywhere she looked, there seemed to be another window, another bit of finery. How was she supposed to live in this? How was she supposed to manage a home – nay, a palace this size?

"And on the subject of secrets – "

She frowned at her husband. "We were not, but continue."

Maxim laughed. "Did I mention there are servants here? Lots of servants. I had no idea that renouncing my title would encourage my extended family to give me such a large stipend, but they have, and it includes servants. I do not want you to do a thing while we wait for this baby."

"Servants?" Meredith said with a frown. "Will any of them want to play with me?"

"You said no more secrets!" Anne said with a laugh. She could not help it. The entire thing was so ridiculous! How was it possible that the only daughter of a Kentish baronet could end up living in a palace in Russia?

"I said none that matter," corrected Maxim. "Now, kiss me."

Anne glorified in the feeling of his lips on hers, but blushed and pulled away as her father coughed loudly.

"Can I pick my own room?"

She laughed at Meredith, and then placed a hand on her stomach as her second daughter – or perhaps, her first son – kicked along with its sibling.

"You most certainly can," said Maxim. "But remember, the baby will need its own room!"

He raised his voice as she darted away from Sir Thomas and ran through the gatehouse excitedly.

Her father moved towards them, and said gruffly, "You never mentioned this, Maxim. A palace. Servants. After your rejection by the Prince Regent, I was under the impression that you would be forced to work to earn your keep."

Anne looked at her husband quickly, but he was not offended.

"My dear Sir Thomas," he said gently. "I know I could never have bought you, you are too honourable for that. This way, you can be assured that you permitted me to marry your daughter for who I am, not what I am."

It was all the reassurance Sir Thomas needed. After cupping his daughter's cheek and smiling, he followed his granddaughter's

footsteps in the snow.

Anne sighed happily. "You know, this is one of the best secrets you could ever have kept from me."

Maxim wrapped his arms around her. "It will be Christmas again soon. I will have to think about what to get you."

She laughed. "I do not think I will have to worry – I have your present right here!"

Placing one of his hands on her stomach, they waited and then both grinned as their child kicked out at the world.

"You know, no matter what the world says, you are a Czarina to me," he whispered.

Anne nodded. "I know, and I am perfectly happy to keep secrets from the outside world, not from each other."

Maxim nodded, and leaned forward for another kiss. "Except, maybe, what I have got for you for Christmas..."

HISTORICAL NOTE

I always strive for accuracy with my historical books, as a historian myself, and I have done my best to make my research pertinent and accurate. Any mistakes that have slipped in must be forgiven, as I am but a lover of this era, not an expert.

About the Author

Emily Murdoch is a historian and writer. Throughout her career so far she has examined a codex and transcribed medieval sermons at the Bodleian Library in Oxford, designed part of an exhibition for the Yorkshire Museum, worked as a researcher for a BBC documentary presented by Ian Hislop, and worked at Polesden Lacey with the National Trust. She has a degree in History and English, and a Masters in Medieval Studies, both from the University of York. Emily has a medieval series, three Regency series, and a Western series published, and is currently working on several new projects.

You can follow her on twitter and instagram @emilyekmurdoch, find her on facebook at www.facebook.com/theemilyekmurdoch, and read her blog at www.emilyekmurdoch.com

